NO MAN'S SKY: THE INSIDE STORY

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ALIEN ISOLATION

THE SCI-FI MASTERPIECE FINALLY GETS THE GAME IT DESERVES

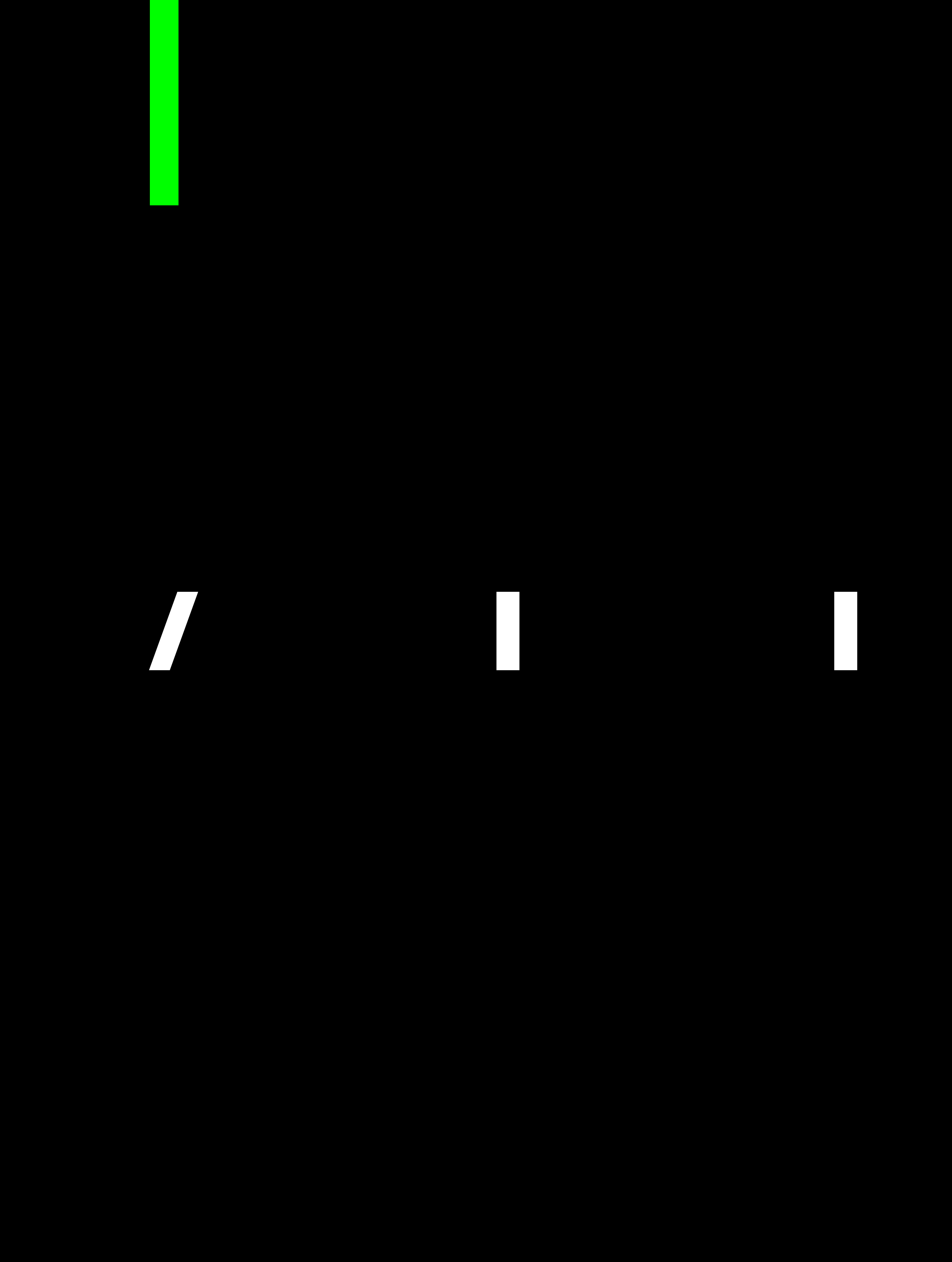
VALVE'S STEAM BOX

THE PC THAT'S GUNNING FOR DOMINANCE OF THE LIVING ROOM

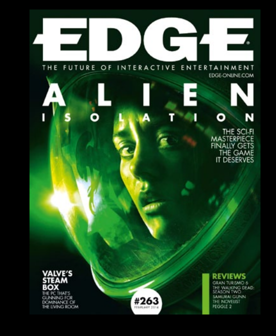
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THE WALKING DEAD: SEASON TWO
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#263
FEBRUARY 2014



Looking for the stories behind the numbers



A few years ago, a group of three journalists from Japan's Famitsu group of videogame magazines visited the **Edge** offices. They wanted to talk to us about how we worked, so we gathered in a meeting room for a discussion over coffee and some expensive, only-when-you-have-guests biscuits. It turned out that we had many things in common, and the conversation involved plenty of agreement and nodding of heads. Then came the question: "How many people work in-house at **Edge**?" "Seven," we said. Our guests looked at each other and burst into laughter. Famitsu's teams are used to working in offices stuffed with banks of editorial, planning and design staff, and to these people the concept of **Edge**'s production being handled by such a comparatively small group seemed outlandish to the point of hilarity.

We were reminded of the Famitsu meeting this month – albeit in the context of something with ambitions of a far dizzier magnitude – when we visited Hello Games in Guildford to talk about *No Man's Sky*. It's a game whose credentials have been questioned repeatedly since its announcement because it's being produced by just four people. Who are they, these creators of cartoony motorbiking romp *Joe Danger*, to be building such a preposterously far-reaching project? Our report this issue goes in search of some answers.

About 20 miles south of Hello Games' HQ we find the offices of Creative Assembly and a more familiar sight: desk upon desk stacked with computer systems lined up to feed the greedy beast that is traditional triple-A game development. Despite the glaring disparity in team size, though, there are parallels between *No Man's Sky* and what is happening here on cover game *Alien: Isolation*. Both titles clearly involve space settings, but it's the obsessive attention to detail that marks the productions as relatives.

Ultimately, raw numbers can count for a great deal, but attitude is more important. The approach Creative Assembly is taking in resurrecting one of entertainment's most powerful properties feels like the right one, and it appears to be bearing some delicious fruit, as our in-depth story illustrates.





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Hype

Play

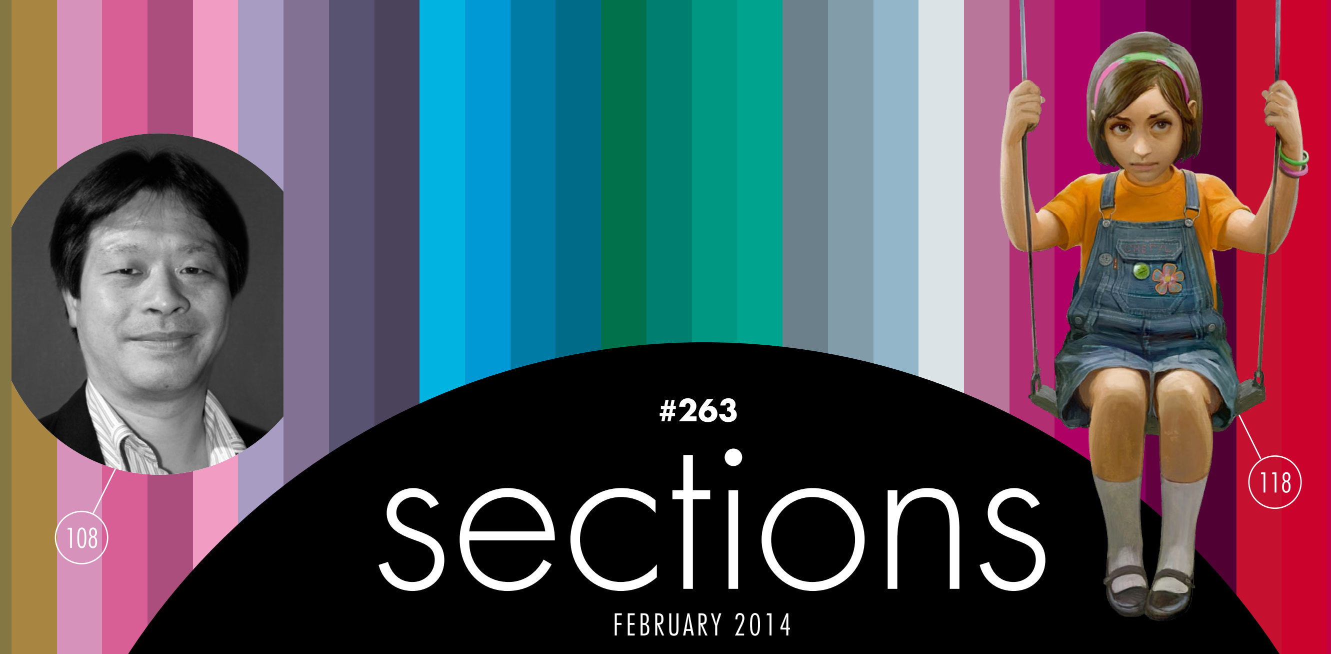

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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

The early days of the new console generation are in danger of being defined not by graphical leaps or new experiences, but by microtransactions (1). The effects of free-to-play conventions on full-priced games are explored on p10, from the way they compromise game design to the psychological dissonance they create. On p14, we crack open Valve's Steam Machines (2) and explore the new Linux-based operating system powering them. Far from just a PC under your TV, Steam Machines represent a whole new platform in the videogame space, and their disrupting effect will either define 2014 or be an Ouya-sized disaster for Valve. To Japan on p16, and to Playism (3), the Japanese company helping westerners bring their games to Japan, and Japan's indies send their games west. On p18, developer Zoe Quinn discusses the abuse she faced for placing her game, *Depression Quest* (4), on Steam Greenlight, and her reasons for tackling misogynists head-on. Mega Drive design documents are exposed on p20, as Read Only Memory's Darren Wall reveals the follow-up to his Sensible Software art book, Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works (5). Platinum's Hideki Kamiya (6) explains why he rarely makes sequels in Soundbytes on p22, and finally Chronicle director Josh Trank (7) considers why *Forza 5* might be Skynet in disguise in My Favourite Game on p24.



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The next-gen cash grab

How in-app purchases fundamentally compromised game design during the introduction of a new generation of home consoles

The name is as ugly as the concept. 'Paymium', where you're encouraged to buy content in a game you've already paid for, has been lurking in the shadows for years, but it's become overt with the arrival of a new generation. This is particularly true on Xbox One, where the model has been embraced wholesale, with developers even compromising design to make the cynical system work.

Almost all of Microsoft's launch exclusives featured in-app purchases of some kind. Take *Forza Motorsport 5*. While players could pay real money for virtual vehicles in *Forza 4* and *Horizon*, the system moved to the foreground this generation. Your real cash currency is forever visible in the game's menus; the value of in-game currency is now limited, with reduced prizes for victory and huge price tags on the most desirable cars; and the Free Play mode has been gutted to force you to spend more money just to sit behind the wheel of a Lotus F1 car.





From top: Chris Wright is CEO of GamesAnalytics; Jamie Madigan blogs at www.psychologyofgames.com

Internet forums are filled with gamers reacting with indignant horror to the paymium creep, while game sites post hand-wringing editorials on where it will lead. Players' reactions to *Forza 5*'s use of the model were so hostile that the game was patched within a month, slashing car prices by up to two-thirds and upping the prize pots.

The problem is fundamental, though. Paymium means pairing two diametrically opposed business models. In free-to-play titles, there is an understanding that the basic experience is free, but in return the studio can encourage players to pay for certain elements throughout the game. Indeed, free-to-play titles are designed from the ground up as monetised systems, their core compulsion loops built around concepts of friction and conversion. Everything is geared towards getting the player to the point at which they'll spend.

"We call it the threshold of engagement," **Chris Wright**, CEO of research company GamesAnalytics, says. "We have done a lot of work to understand what motivates players to spend money and when that crossover occurs. We find there is an optimum point in all [F2P] games where players who spend money exhibit a very different behaviour. These players will become very engaged in the game, change how they play and often become advocates, driving viral activity. Getting players to this point and not pushing them to spend too early is very important."

In a retail purchase, the contract is different. You have paid a premium price, which is ostensibly for all the content necessary to enjoy the game. In this context, free-to-play conventions can feel exploitative. "F2P evangelists will insist it's about player choice," says Size Five designer **Dan Marshall**. "They'll insist that you can skip all this nickel-and-dime stuff if you want, but it's not even remotely true. Gameplay is bent out of position



right from the off to accommodate F2P mechanics, and the whole game crumples flat as a result. It becomes about how you get the player to pay, not how you get the player to have fun."

Microtransactions in full-price games aren't new. As soon as broadband speeds allowed for widespread digital distribution and seamless post-release billing systems, the business model started creeping into mainstream retail titles. EA's *The Godfather* was among the earliest examples. Borrowing the 'grind or pay' mechanic from the eastern MMORPG world, the title allowed players to purchase in-game money to boost their crime empire's fortunes. *The Godfather* might be patient zero for paymium but *FIFA Ultimate Team* made it viable as gaming's most toxic revolution. *Ultimate Team* charged for packs of player 'trading cards', the constructed teams available to play with online. It was fun and players loved it, in part because it felt fair and because it felt like it belonged – the kids who traded World Cup stickers in the playground could now trade virtual men in *FIFA 09*.

Mass Effect 3 and *Dead Space 3* microtransactions followed, and in February 2013 EA's chief financial officer, **Blake Jorgensen**, told delegates at a media and telecoms conference that the company would be putting paid-for content into all its titles. "Consumers are enjoying and embracing that way of business," he declared.

It's easy to see why the model is so appealing to publishers. During an investor call in September 2012, Ubisoft's worldwide online director, **Stéphanie Perotti**, stated, "Free-to-play is a very flexible business model. The player has the capability to spend more than in a traditional model." And when players are already paying £50 on *FIFA* before doubling that on *Ultimate Team* with a smile, it must seem like a model to emulate.

"They'll insist you can skip all this nickel-and-dime stuff if you want, but it's not even remotely true"

But *FIFA Ultimate Team* is special. It's a part of the game kept separate from the main career modes – an opt-in extra lots of players have come to enjoy, rather than the entrenched game-compromising cash grab Dan Marshall mentions.

Indeed, there are key differences in the structure, psychology and game design philosophy of free and paid-for titles. **Jamie Madigan**, who blogs at www.psychologyofgames.com, talks about free-to-play games and the concept of ego depletion. "F2P systems hinge a lot on hitting us when our willpower is exhausted," he says. "Recent research has suggested that willpower is like a muscle: it gets worn out and needs time to regenerate. While it's low, our brains are more likely to rely on the faster moving, less demanding systems; we become susceptible to irrational decisions and routine biases, so hitting us with offers after mentally demanding tasks or portions of a game is effective."

Interruption and disruption via lengthy build times in the F2P *Clash Of Clans* can create a willing customer, whereas in retail games the desirable state is usually one of flow and of total immersion, with the gameplay being its own reward. The constant reminders of the things you could achieve if only you would pay 79 pence will drag you out of that zone, and monetised systems disrupt the feedback loops. *Crimson Dragon* is a *Panzer Dragoon* sequel in all bar name, but the game's swooping cinematic pace has been dissected into tedious grindable chunks. In *Diablo III*, many players feel the whole appeal of hunting for loot was destroyed by the online auction house, where everything was available for a price."[It] can short circuit the natural pace of item drops, making the game feel less rewarding for some players," wrote ex-*Diablo III* game director **Jay Wilson**. The auction houses are being dropped based on player feedback.

Every car in *Forza 5* can be purchased with the game's standard credits or the alternative 'token' currency. Tokens can only be purchased with real cash at an exchange rate of 100TK to 79 pence, but buy in bulk and you'll get more for your money. Buy 10,000 for £64.99 and you'll receive another 10,000 for free







From top: Oscar Clark, a specialist in F2P; Ste Pickford of Zee-3; Rebellion co-founder Jason Kingsley

Even if the implementation of microtransactions genuinely has no effect on a game's design, it can still fundamentally damage the relationship between player and developer. "From a buying psychology perspective, you risk breaking the trust of the player," explains **Oscar Clark**, a specialist in free-to-play mechanics. "They bought the game by paying an up-front [cost] based on an expectation of utility. In-app purchases can undermine this sense of invested value, unless you can clearly demonstrate that the additional spend is bringing them something amazing." For the sceptical player, the gameworld is no longer a virtual environment in which to abandon oneself; now it's a shop, and the creator is just another salesperson.

Once commerce enters the scenario, so does suspicion. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is filled with collectible trinkets that are hidden throughout its world. Is that to offer replay value and to reward exploration, or are they there so that Ubisoft can sell desperate gamers a Time Saver pack revealing the locations of undiscovered items on their map?

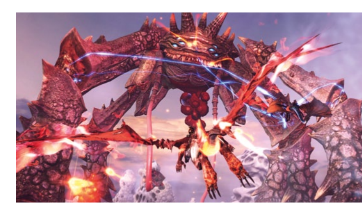
But publishers don't really want to answer these questions. When we approached Electronic Arts, Ubisoft and Microsoft for comment, the first two failed to respond, and Microsoft declined. The philosophy at the moment is to implement microtransactions quietly, then apologise and tweak the economy only if players complain. In this way, it is hoped the modern paymium model will creep into games largely unnoticed.

So if paymium is something to be furtive about, why do it? Some game developers talk about using microtransactions in order to expand the audience. "There's a lot of players out there, especially players coming from mobile games, who are accustomed to microtransactions," *Dead Space 3* producer **John Calhoun** told CVG in January 2013. "They're like, 'I need this now; I want this now.' They need instant gratification."

But there are other ways to appease those players. *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* has redesigned its multiplayer unlock system, making all weapons available to players of any level so long as they can amass the Squad Points, which are given out for completing operations in-game and ranking up. It's not instant gratification, but it's closer, and it doesn't break the systems built for players to enjoy.







Mass Effect 3 (top) and *FIFA 14* added paymium features largely without harming the core experience, but Microsoft's *Crimson Dragon* is built on paying extra to get the most from a game you already own

"This is a problem that game designers already understand and appreciate," **Ste Pickford** of Zee-3, creator of *Magnetic Billiards*, says about player frustration. "This is why we have relatively new features like sliding difficulty levels, so players can [skip past] a boss or difficult battle, or Nintendo's Super Guide, or giving players [an invincible] white Tanooki suit in the new *Mario* game if they fail a level too many times. There's a sense that the player has bought the game, and they have a right to access all the content, even if they're not very good at the game itself."

Developers seem to want their games to be generous, then. Turn 10's Dan Greenawalt has explained that *Forza 5*'s token system is to allow players who want shortcuts to access 'cheats' for a nominal fee. Perhaps the studio believes that to be true – it was true of *Forza 4*, certainly – but *Forza 5*'s clear design compromises result in a game that makes frequent attempts to encourage withdrawals from players' wallets.

A better defence for Turn 10 and other developers is the sheer brutal cost of game development. With each new technological advance, the costs of triple-A development are increasing, but sales from retail games remain relatively static. EA's Jorgensen has forecasted a five to ten per cent rise in development costs on eighth-gen platforms. Passing that cost on to players, they might argue, is the only way to support the failing development model.

But it's unfair to pass the buck. Shouldn't the burden instead be on Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo to lower licensing fees, and on publishers and developers to better manage product development? "New technological and creative solutions, and changes in the idea of how games should be sold, mean that budgets *can* come down," Rebellion co-founder **Jason Kingsley** says. "While some areas of development, such as making a high-quality main character model, have become more costly, who's



***Forza 5*'s most expensive vehicles are the Ferrari 250 GTO and the Lotus E21 F1 car, at 6,000,000 credits (or 2,334TK), pre-patch. The December update cut both the credit and token prices for the highest-end cars by two thirds**

to say you can't make smaller games sold at a lower price point that provide a triple-A experience? Game design is more about creativity than money."

If the thriving indie sector has shown us anything, it's that creativity can win out over technology. One of the most highly rated games of the next-gen launch window has been *Resogun*, a 2D shooter that harks back to *Defender*. *Minecraft* has made millions from charming chunky visuals. *DayZ* and *State Of Decay* each provided more post-apocalyptic tension than *Resident Evil 6* and *Silent Hill: Downpour* combined.

Certainly games have to amaze, but that doesn't necessarily involve doubling the budget every year. "Spectacle comes in many shapes and forms," says Marshall. "It isn't just the level of bump mapping on a character model's eyeballs. Spectacle is *No Man's Sky* stealing the show at the VGX Awards. It's art direction that takes your breath away. It's scriptwriting with twists that make you gasp. It's mechanics that have you itching to play while you're stuck at work. That's spectacle. That's what the game industry does like no one else. That's where we need to focus, and it doesn't have to be expensive."

"There's a sense that the player has bought the game, and they have a right to access all the content"

The alternative, for some titles, may be just to embrace free-to-play entirely – at least this way players know where they stand, and the design needn't be compromised. "Any creative process is as much art as science, and game design is no different," says **Nicholas Lovell**, the founder of Games Brief and author of F2P monetisation book The Curve. "The traditional paid model has bred a bloated and difficult-to-manage creative approach, which leads to high-profile failures – think RealTime Worlds and 37 Studios. [It also leads to] games that sell well but fail to meet internal expectations, such as the recent *Tomb Raider* title. The free-to-play business model enables companies to create smaller experiences, validate the market demand and then to continue to support it."

Sony once suggested the notion of *Gran Turismo* as a platform in its own right, a base game into which you'd slot your favourite cars for a real cash price. Of the 1,200 cars in *GT6*, how many will you drive? Will you stump up for a GT-R or a LaFerrari, knowing you'd never race in any other car anyway? Would you be excited to try different cars every week on a short-term trial basis?

Since Sony floated the idea in 2005, *League Of Legends* has become the biggest game in the world based exactly on the latter model. If *Forza 6* or *Gran Turismo 7* were free-to-play games piped into every last Xbox One and PlayStation 4 in the world, how much money could those games make from casual players willing to buy their favourite cars?

Paymium is a tax forced onto players by an inefficient industry, and better alternatives are available. It will take players rejecting the model entirely to force developers in that direction, but perhaps it will only take a few more *Forza 5*s – games so abundantly compromised that they need their economies rewritten from scratch – to turn the tide against paymium for good. ■

GRAND THEFT

The paymium problem is most evident on Xbox One, but is by no means exclusive to the platform. There is a huge disparity between the economy in *GTAV* and its monetised equivalent, *GTA Online*. Players joining the latter after its October launch found they'd have to grind jobs and deathmatch sessions for many hours to level up to get better weapons. Sony has been slower to adopt the model, but *Gran Turismo 6* allows players to buy desirable cars and upgrades rather than earn them. The system is subtly integrated through the GT Store, but the prices are steep: a 7m credit pack costs £39.99. Infamously, a *GT6* Jaguar XJ13 costs just under £120.

Industrial revolution

Steam Machines are now with testers. What do they make of Valve's disruption tactics?

Announced in September 2013, Steam Machines are the cornerstone of what's perhaps Valve's most ambitious endeavour to date. Not content with dominating digital distribution via the Steam store and client, Valve is now hoping to stretch into the living room with an alternative to traditional desktop PCs, a new controller and its own OS.

The twist is, it's not going to be the only company making Steam Machines. Valve manufactured 300 prototypes to test specs and gather feedback, which were sent out on December 15, 2013. In the longterm, however, Valve plans to work with numerous partners to produce different types of Steam Machine. Some will be low-power, low-cost boxes. Others, like Valve's own design, will break the bank.

"The build quality is amazing," says one tester, **Colbehr** (who prefers to be known by this handle), of his Steam Machine. Various specifications were shipped to testers, since the system is designed to be as modifiable as a regular desktop PC, but Colbehr's machine contains Nvidia's GTX 780, a £400 graphics card, alongside a quad-core Core i5-4570 and 16GB of RAM – powerful enough to run demanding games such as *Metro: Last Light* at their highest quality settings.

While all the components inside Steam Machines are off-the-shelf, Valve has designed the cases and built them to make the package simpler than a standard PC. "It's very easy to use," says Colbehr. "Plug everything in and you're good to go." It looks a lot nicer than a desktop underneath a TV, too.

The second part of the Steam Machine designed and produced by Valve is the controller. It's by far the boldest and most unusual part of the system, replacing the standard dual analogue sticks with two concave touchpads, each of which provides precise haptic feedback to your thumbs as you run them across its surface. The goal is to create a comfortable control system that can match the precision of a mouse. In fact, as far as games are concerned, it is a mouse, meaning it has instant native support in all PC games. The response from beta testers has been especially positive for FPSes.

> Bar bug reports, the public comments from the first group of testers are inevitably positive

But Colbehr isn't without criticism. "There have been a few bugs with the controller. It may just be mine, but the plug doesn't allow the cord to travel far enough into the port. I'm sure that can be fixed, but the pads have been bugging a little bit too, and I can't really explain that."

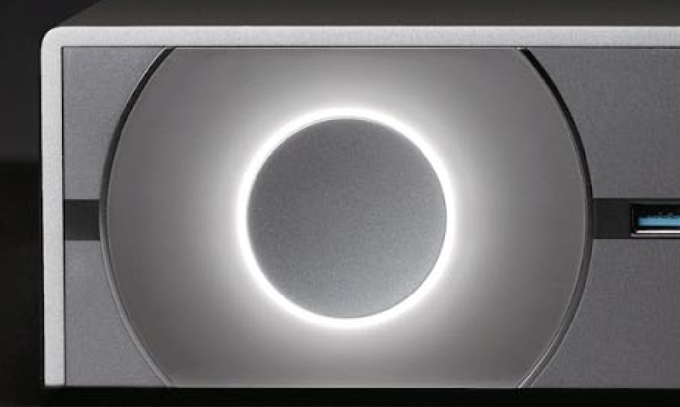
The controller is the only part of the hardware that Valve will manufacture and sell without encouraging partners to produce their own variants. The first tests by developers suggested the Steam Machine controller takes learning time akin to the N64 pad, but the curve reported by testers is steeper.

While the hardware was sent to just 300 testers, the final piece of the puzzle was released more broadly. SteamOS is a Linux-powered operating system that extends the trend begun in Steam's Big Picture mode. It's the most important part of Valve's move for the living room. Anyone can currently download and install the SteamOS beta, effectively turning any PC into a Steam Machine, although Valve states that the OS is only for "intrepid Linux hackers" at the moment. It's right to do so: there are more limitations than features attached to the current version.

If you download the approximately 2.5GB of SteamOS install files and follow the instructions, the process will delete all existing files on your PC, including all hard drive partitions. There is no option to install the OS on a secondary hard drive and, at the time of writing, no method by which to dual boot SteamOS on top of an existing Windows install. If you have an ATI



SteamOS hews closely to Big Picture mode at the moment, but its expected streaming update looks set to drastically broaden its functionality



Valve's Steam Machine prototype case is space efficient, being able to accommodate the GTX Titan. Partners will field their own designs

graphics card, you'll struggle with drivers. You'll also need a modern machine capable of booting via UEFI rather than BIOS.

While you can't currently dual boot SteamOS on a Windows machine, you can, however, dual boot Windows on a Steam Machine with SteamOS already installed. That flexibility is part of the Steam Machine's appeal to gamers dissatisfied with current consoles, including Colbehr. "I think of it as a PC, because you can do more on it than a console. It looks like a console and feels like a console until you have a desktop like any other computer."

Colbehr is positive about his experiences with SteamOS, praising its looks and ease of use, but it currently does nothing more than what's offered by Big Picture mode on a Windows desktop. That should change in the coming months when Valve adds in-home streaming, enabling you to broadcast videogames from a powerful desktop PC to a more lightweight machine plugged into a television.

As glowing as feedback from beta testers have been – and bar bug reports, the public comments from the first group of testers are inevitably positive – there's a more important group that has yet to contribute to the discussion: developers.

The only games currently playable on SteamOS and Steam Machines are those that already have Linux releases. The past three years have been bountiful for the open-source OS, as both Valve and the Humble Bundle have driven indie and mainstream developers to port their games to the system. Despite this growth, the library of games is still a far smaller selection than you can play on a Windows machine. Valve's Steam Machines don't bring PC gaming to the living room; rather, they add a sixth platform to developers' workloads – yet another system architecture and input device to cater for.

A more open market can only be positive, but Valve's living room gambit is dependent on studios willing to risk that a sizeable new audience is waiting for them on a new OS – and in the most crowded room in the house. ■

THE CHOSEN 300
The 300 Steam Machine beta testers were selected from the Steam Universe community group, with 100 picked based on prior beta contributions and a further 200 selected at random. All the chosen testers are based within North America for shipping reasons. Each Machine was delivered in a wooden box, with the device suspended in foam inside. The beta Machine cases come with 300 small ventilation holes on top, with a different hole highlighted on each, so that they can be traced should any appear on eBay.



Westward bound

How the Osaka-based Playism is helping bring the work of Japanese indies onto the global stage

The dying weeks of 2013 saw two Japanese indie games do something their respective developers were not expecting: make it through Greenlight. But arena-based schoolgirl slasher-brawler *Mitsurugi Kamui Hikae* by Zenith Blue and moddable 3D fighter *EF-12* from Quad Arrow might never have made it without the help of Playism. Launched in May 2011, this division of Osaka-based localisation and marketing company Active Gaming Media started out as a way to take western indie games to Japan, with an online store selling localised versions of titles such as *Machinarium* and *SpaceChem*.

It was with the localisation of Nigoro's archaeological platformer *La-Mulana* in July 2012 that the team launched an English-language version of the Playism store and began working in earnest with Japanese devs to bring their games west.

"[Nigoro] had released *La-Mulana* on Wii in Japan," says **Josh Weatherford**, an Osaka-based American and one of two full-time Playsim staff, "but there were problems with their publisher and they weren't able to get it on the WiiWare store in the States and Europe, so they told us they wanted to work together to release it on PC."

This was shortly before the launch of Greenlight, and although the game was on sale on Playism, the team faced several frustrating months, first waiting for Valve's initiative to start, and then figuring out how to attract Steam players.

It seems almost counterintuitive for a company with its own online store to work so hard sending clients to Steam in the first place, but while Playism doesn't publish everything it sells on its store, it does offer publishing as an option to Japanese developers. This is the case with *La-Mulana*, *EF-12* and *Mitsurugi*. So when a Playism-published game heads to Greenlight, an extra contract is drawn up to establish a revenue share. Once the games are on Steam, Playism takes a cut in return for helping to market and manage the game and for other Steam-specific advice, such as how to implement extras like trading cards and badges.

"Playism helped us with the localisation and various other publishing responsibilities," says Zenith Blue leader '**Tsumugari**'. "They were in charge of creating the [Greenlight] page, posting blog updates, replying to comments and generally supporting the project in any way they could. They helped our products reach the world at large."

> "Greenlight really does validate that the content we're bringing over is content people want to play"

"*EF-12* has a lot of documentation that required translation into English," says **Masahiro Onoguchi**, founder of Quad Arrow. "Past that, we needed to engage the English-speaking community on Greenlight, which meant we needed the continual cooperation of another company. Because of [Playism], we were able to concentrate on improving *EF-12*."

Weatherford's colleague, **Nayan Ramachandran**, explains that the games themselves are not localised for cultural content; instead the priority is to "keep the Japanese flavour". Although about 80 per cent of the games on the Playism store are Japanese versions of western games, Weatherford says that western fans of Japanese games tend to buy more titles. "Western indie games in Japan are still kind of niche," he explains.





Playism has two full-time staff, Nayan Ramachandran (top) and Josh Weatherford, supported by others from parent AGM



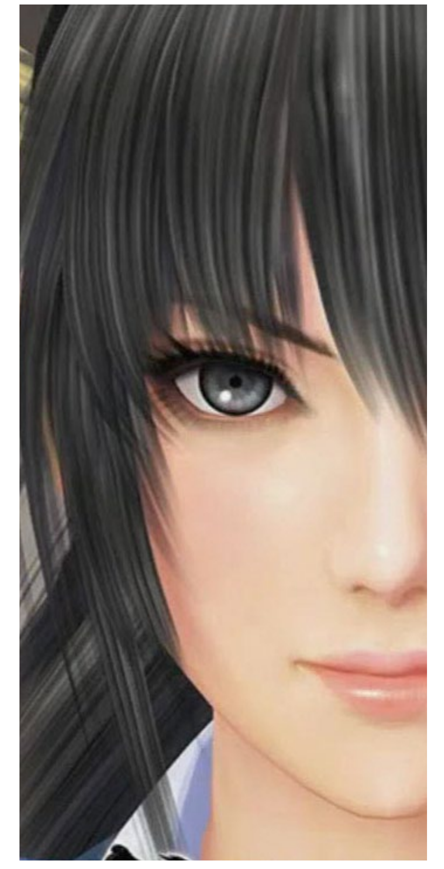
Aside from the Steam releases of *Mitsurugi* and *EF-12* this year, Playism will also publish *La-Mulana 2*, as well as bringing English versions of sidescrolling shooter *Gunhound* and anime-styled arena fighter *Magical Battle Festa* to its store, choices informed by the company's policy of heeding the requests of western gamers. The company is also moving into self-publishing on PlayStation Network.

"In America and Europe, you're allowed to self-publish [to PSN] without having a corporate entity, but in Japan you have to be incorporated," says Weatherford. "A lot of the doujin circles [independent hobbyist groups] are not going to be able to get onto PS4 with their own power, so we'll be working closely with Sony Japan and with developers as a middleman to bring more stuff out on PS4 and Vita in the future."

Indeed, initiatives such as Greenlight and PSN will surely play a major part in securing the Japanese industry's future. Removing the complex hierarchical structure and legacy of collusion barring the way means young indie developers can finally deliver their games into the hands of the people who want to play them, wherever they may be.

"Our recent experience on Greenlight has been a huge success for us, because it really does validate that the content we're bringing over is content people want to play," Ramachandran says. "Just the same way that Japanese games were so popular in the 8bit and 16bit days, that is starting to come into indie games now. These Japanese indies have something really amazing to show." ■

Anyone can make fighter models for *EF-12*, much like a 3D version of *MUGEN*. The names of default fighters carry prefixes such as VF (*Virtua Fighter*) and TK (*Tekken*), which allude to their control type







***La-Mulana*'s (centre) chances of a US/Euro WiiWare release looked slim until Playism helped get it to western PC players in mid-2012. *Mitsurugi*'s (above) mix of martial arts, robots and female fighters made it a hit at Japan's biggest DIY market, Comiket**

PICKING UP STEAM

Spotlighting Playism's wave of Japanese Greenlight successes



Tsumugari at Zenith Blue says he thinks Greenlight users were drawn to *Mitsurugi Kamui Hikae*'s straightforward gameplay and anime-influenced character designs. "It turns out that a game that features young girls battling with weapons is something that gamers from all around the world enjoy playing," he says. Meanwhile, *EF-12*'s customisable fighting game engine, sort of a 3D *MUGEN*, seems ideal for Steam Workshop support, especially if Quad Arrow continues to allow players to pay what they want for the game, from $1 upwards. Onoguchi is loath to comment, simply asking: "Why are you so crazy about money?"

Downtime

Why the co-creator of Depression Quest is fighting back against Internet trolls

The warning came in an anonymous email: indie developer **Zoe Quinn** was to be the target of a forum-organised raid. Her game, *Depression Quest* (co-created with Patrick Lindsey and Isaac Schankler), attempts to give players some idea of what it feels like to live with depression, and is based on the personal experiences of the team. The game has attracted a great deal of attention, and even some awards, since its release. But despite surviving YouTube, Reddit and 4chan commenters with little trouble, the arrival of the interactive fiction game on Steam Greenlight in December 2013 proved problematic for certain members of one message board, triggering a disquieting chain of events.

"I was content to take some screengrabs of the message board to show friends and leave it at that," Quinn tells us. "I didn't engage, because I know how the Internet works and that would just make them target me more. It was something I wasn't really taking seriously at all, until two weeks later I got a phone call and I couldn't make out what was happening at first. Then I realised it was somebody jerking off."

Quinn had been in a similar place once before. This was *Depression Quest*'s second Greenlight campaign, having faced a similar level of resistance from a vocal minority the first time around – enough that Quinn felt forced to pull it.

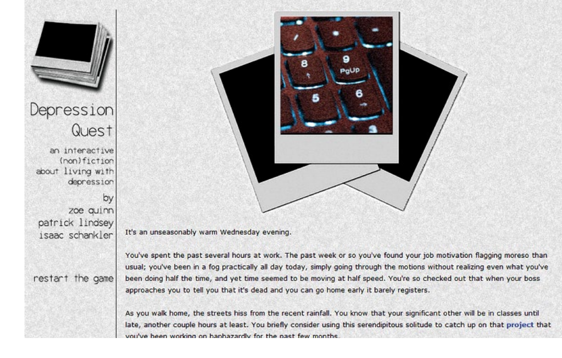
"We were putting a nontraditional game directly in the line of sight of very traditional gamers. And *some* traditional gamers have huge issues with women, and huge issues with games being anything that aren't space marines or plumbers! People were saying things like, 'This isn't a game. This is terrible. You should go kill yourself,' 'Depression isn't real,' or 'You're just pushing pills.' And then it started intensifying offsite, the threats started rolling in by emails, and then somebody sent this really detailed letter to my house about how they wanted to rape me."

Quinn was determined not to abandon *Depression Quest*'s second shot at Greenlight, but the phone incident forced her to change her number and hunker down to wait out the storm. Phone in Airplane mode, she heeded the advice of peers, colleagues and that anonymous emailer: 'Don't feed the trolls.'

> "I'm sitting there looking at the phone I can't use and I just snapped. This actually is a fucking problem"

That was until *Mighty No 9* community manager Dina Abou Karam came under fire for her artwork of a female version of the game's protagonist, Beck, and her "corrupting feminist influence". The backlash filled Quinn's Twitter stream, with some parties suggesting that the calls to remove Karam were based on legitimate fears and that sexism didn't exist in games.

"I'm sitting there looking at the phone I can't use because people will fling terrible things at me, and I just snapped. This actually is a fucking problem. I hadn't spoken up because I'm just so used to this, but no, fuck that, this is what's going on, so don't sit there and tell me that sexism doesn't happen. Don't sit there and tell me that harassment doesn't happen to female game developers, because I'm living that right now, and I have on and off for the entirety of my career. I'm sick of this 'Don't feed the trolls' shit, because it doesn't work and all it does is make it so that the people getting harassed can't talk about it.





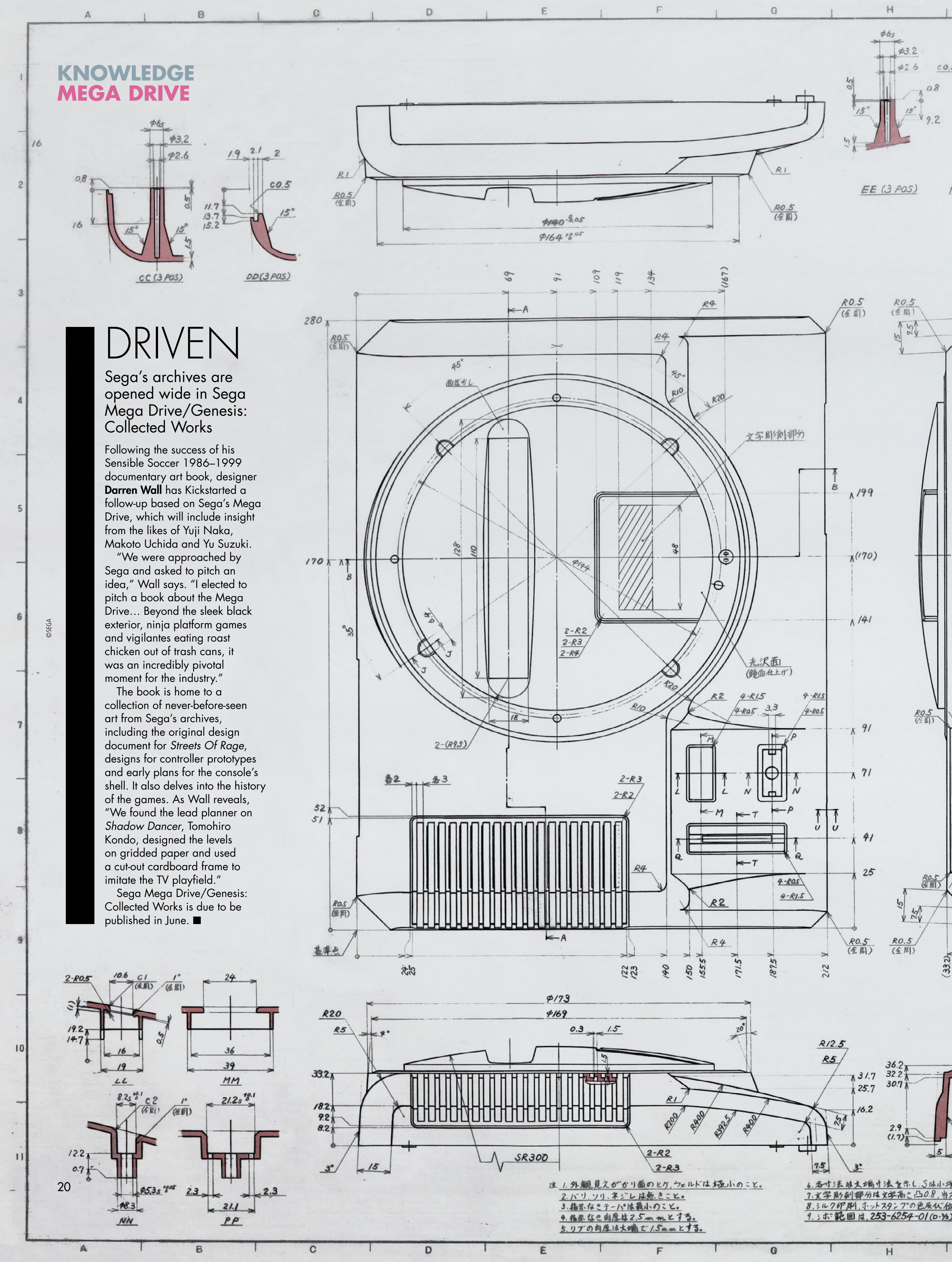
Zoe Quinn, co-creator of PC game *Depression Quest* (above)

POSITIVE THINKING

Outside of the bitter hate campaign directed at *Depression Quest*, the game has generated a huge amount of positive feedback. "Players were sending me these amazingly beautiful letters about their experiences of feeling like they actually had someone to talk to who got it, and I'm still trying to get back to every one of them," says Quinn. "Someone sent me an email and said they were suicidal when they played the game, and that it literally saved their life, which is something I cannot fully process."

"**It's messed up** that people just accept this and it's something that I'm fighting very hard against. [Too many] people accept this as the cost of doing business for a lot of game developers who are people of colour, or women or transgender – anybody who doesn't fit what people think of when you say 'game developer', y'know."

And what of the suggestions that interactive fiction doesn't belong on Steam? "Steam is *the* largest digital distribution service for games, but there are things on there that aren't explicitly games. I want to be on Steam because I absolutely think [*Depression Quest* is] a game, and I'd like to see more nontraditional games like *Proteus*, *Dear Esther* or text-adventure-type things on the platform. The fact is, text adventures have been influential in games since day fricking one. I mean, hello, *Zork* exists, and if people want to pretend that doesn't matter and isn't worthy of Steam, they need to get their heads checked." ■



DRIVEN

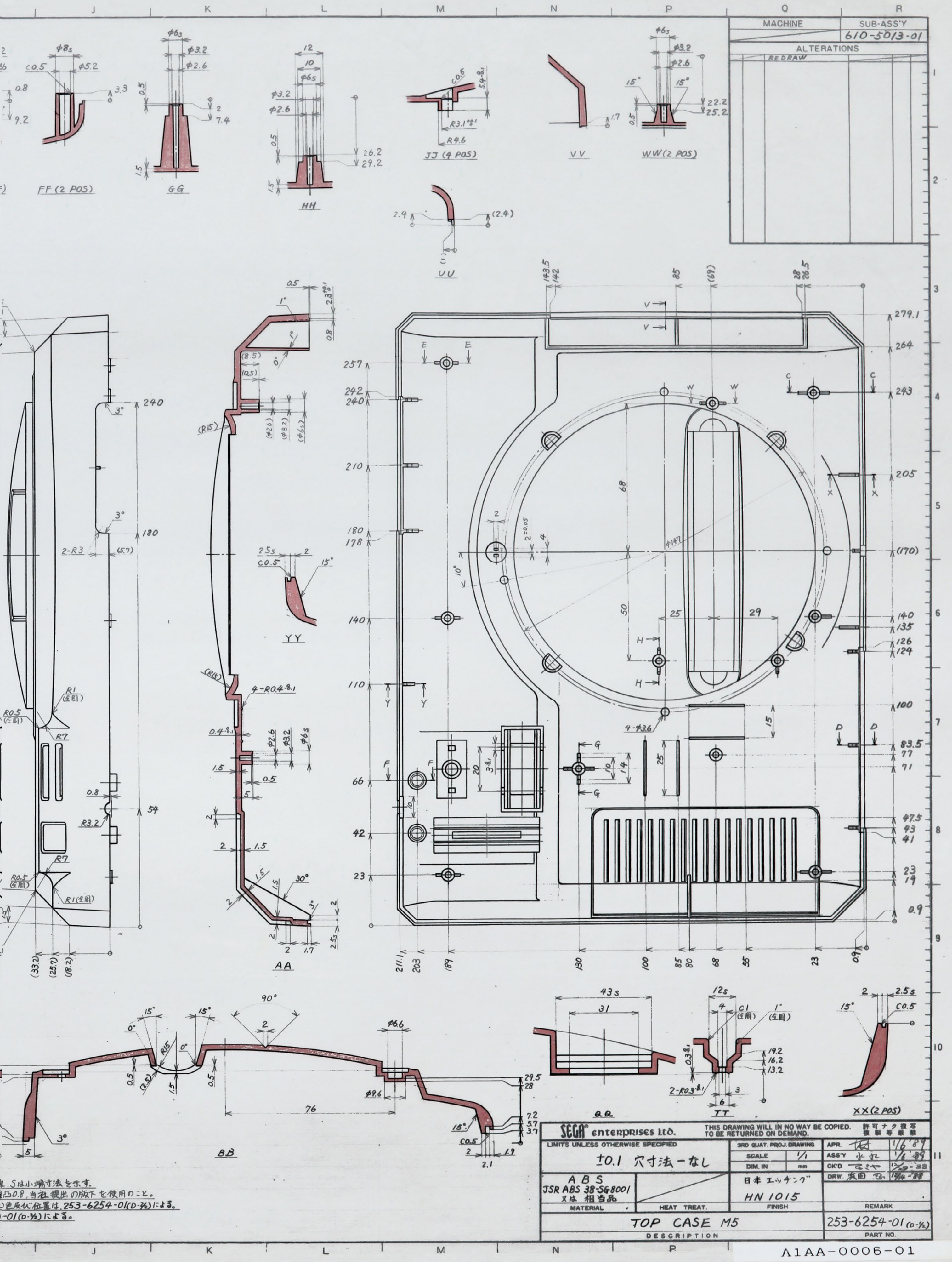
Sega's archives are opened wide in Sega Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works

Following the success of his Sensible Soccer 1986–1999 documentary art book, designer **Darren Wall** has Kickstarted a follow-up based on Sega's Mega Drive, which will include insight from the likes of Yuji Naka, Makoto Uchida and Yu Suzuki.

"We were approached by Sega and asked to pitch an idea," Wall says. "I elected to pitch a book about the Mega Drive… Beyond the sleek black exterior, ninja platform games and vigilantes eating roast chicken out of trash cans, it was an incredibly pivotal moment for the industry."

The book is home to a collection of never-before-seen art from Sega's archives, including the original design document for *Streets Of Rage*, designs for controller prototypes and early plans for the console's shell. It also delves into the history of the games. As Wall reveals, "We found the lead planner on *Shadow Dancer*, Tomohiro Kondo, designed the levels on gridded paper and used a cut-out cardboard frame to imitate the TV playfield."

Sega Mega Drive/Genesis: Collected Works is due to be published in June. ■

MACHINE
SUB-ASS'Y
610-5013-01
ALTERATIONS
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SEGA enterprises Ltd.
THIS DRAWING WILL IN NO WAY BE COPIED. TO BE RETURNED ON DEMAND.
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I felt that ***Minecraft* was maybe my chance to create a Valve** rather than work at Valve."

Markus 'Notch' Persson explains why he turned down a job at Valve



"I wasn't looking at it relative to *Forza 4*; I was looking at it relative to every racing game launched alongside a console."

Turn 10's **Dan Greenawalt** on why he was so sad when players considered *Forza 5* 'small'



"**Nintendo is irrelevant** as a hardware manufacturer in the console business right now."

Former THQ boss **Jason Rubin** removes himself from Nintendo's friends list

"Somebody needs to offer new entertainment to gamers and do the work of sowing seeds that can later grow to be strong pillars."

Why Platinum's **Hideki Kamiya** made *Viewtiful Joe* and *The Wonderful 101*, not *DMC2*

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Mach Storm*
Manufacturer Namco Bandai

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon was built to be more accessible, alienating fans of the series in the process, but the AI-assisted pursuit sequences you'd enter when you successfully engaged an enemy pilot tail were a successful piece of game design, if not a successful piece of *Ace Combat* design.

Mach Storm takes them as its central mechanic. The Paris, Washington, New York, Miami and Tokyo maps have been appropriated, too, and given a slight visual makeover, while the HUD has been redesigned for the cabinet, complete with a score counter and colossal onscreen text after each kill. You're dragged from enemy to enemy on rails, with none of *Assault Horizon*'s open world between dogfights.

Like the game, its cabinet is a repurposed bit of tech. Originally home to Namco's *Gundam* games, the Panoramic Optical Display almost completely surrounds players, while controls rest on a single flight stick and throttle. Add a rudder control and there's nothing about the *Ace Combat* games it couldn't handle. But arcades are about five minutes of fun and *Mach Storm* isn't risking anything in an all-out sensory assault on short attention spans.





My Favourite Game Josh Trank

The director of Chronicle on the Shadow Of The Colossus movie and how Forza 5 has triggered the apocalypse

Director **Josh Trank** was just two years old when he decided to pursue a career in the movies, and his passion for gaming started just as early. Here, the 29-year-old creative talks to us about the artistry of games, the mass exodus of Hollywood's new talent, and why *Forza*'s Drivatars are the new T-1000s.

Like Chronicle, games often give ordinary people superpowers, but people are far more inclined to abuse those powers in a virtual space. Do you think that games should try to emulate realistic scenarios more often?
I think it's like art. The guys working in the game industry are all artists, and I truly mean that. I think they should be as experimental and crazy, as natural or as surreal, as they want to be. The great thing for me is my relationship with that whole world in a creative way, and the way I think about it. That's not my world, it's just a world that I'm a fan of.

There have been a lot of narrative experiments in games lately. Do you think games are starting to challenge Hollywood in terms of storytelling?
No, I don't think so. I think that games are doing their own thing. I don't think it's a question of better, because it's just a different experience. A lot of big sci-fi movies – and I won't say any particular movies – are made with an awareness of the popularity of videogames, and therefore borrow so [many] of the design and visual ideas from those games. I'm like, 'Man, that looks like *Mass Effect*. Those look like *Mass Effect* suits.' And that is not at all original or different. I also feel there's a creative drought in Hollywood right now, because most of the young guys who would come in and be the next young, big directors are all in the videogame industry. I think if the game industry had been what it is now in the '80s, a lot of those great Amblin [Entertainment] directors and people from that era would have been in games, too.

COLOSSAL TALENT
With the release of Chronicle in early 2012, Trank, then 27, became one of the youngest directors to reach number one in the US box office. In doing so, he joined such names as James Cameron, who was 30 when he released The Terminator, and Steven Spielberg, who directed Jaws at the age of 29. Since then, Trank's been rumoured to be working on Venom, a Spider-Man spinoff movie, and an adaptation of The Red Star comics for Warner Bros. Trank is currently working on a reboot of The Fantastic Four, due in spring

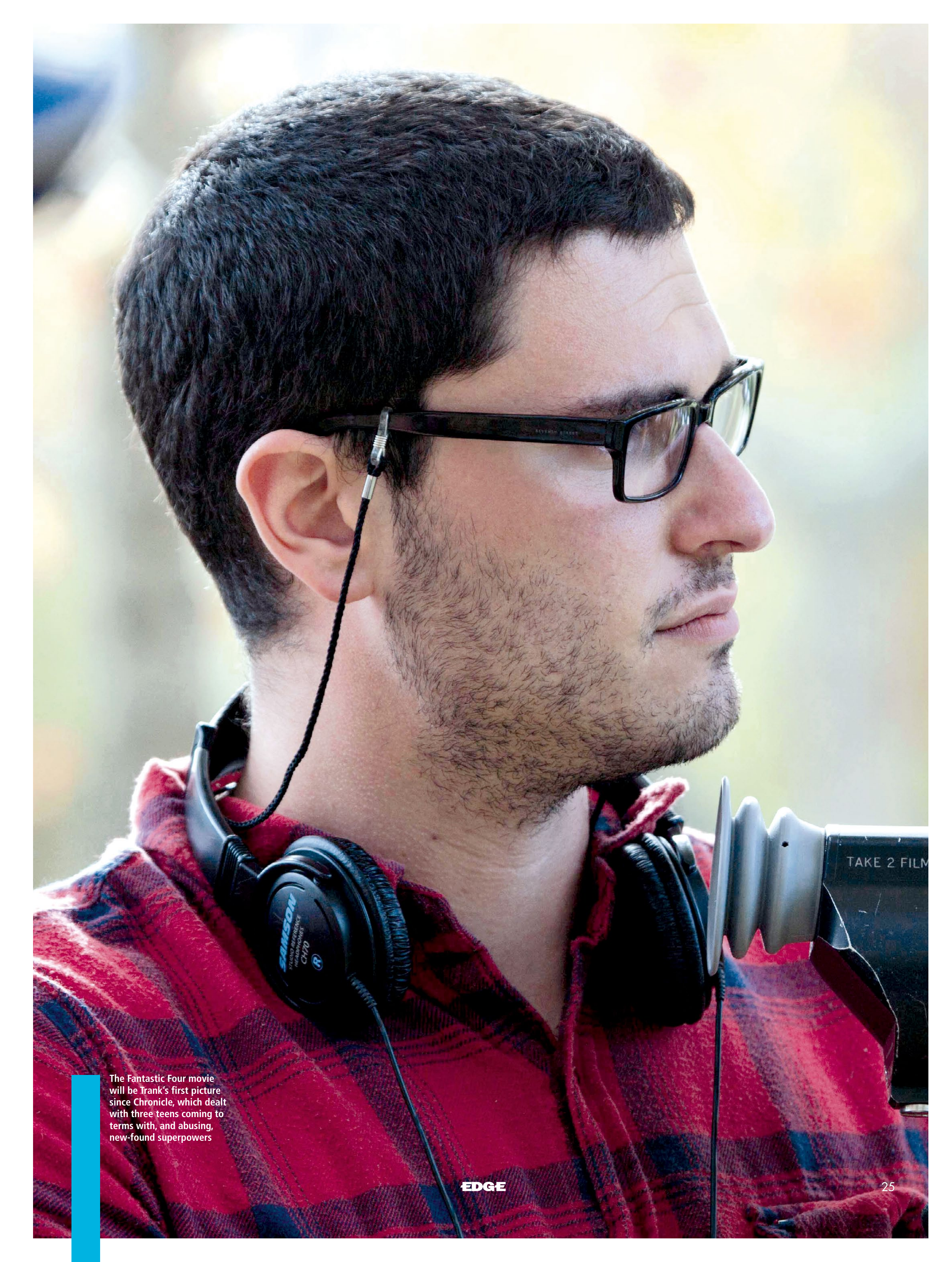


As the industry moves forward, how do you think the new generation of consoles will change things?
Yeah, I'm curious. There's this interesting implication of what kids are going to be able to do when they're my age. Hopefully, it won't be a dystopian sci-fi scenario. Unfortunately, I feel like it's going to become one. When I saw this one demo for Xbox One, there was one thing that frightened me big time: these two top developers were talking about *Forza 5*, and how the game is going to learn you and your driving style, and it's going to be driving and competing for you against other people when you're not there. That scares the shit out of me! This technology that they're going to unleash on the planet will also then lend itself to AI that adapts to how all of us play. I'm just like, 'Wait. Woah, woah. Wait. This is Skynet! What are you talking about? Are you serious?' But they're like, 'Now let's give this technology to everybody.' Now you've just created the T-1000. That's my fear of the next generation of consoles, that it's going to be the arrival of Skynet and the destruction of humanity. I'm not joking.

> "If somebody's doing SOTC, I have to somehow get in there and make sure it's done the right way"

What can you tell us about your involvement with Sony's *Shadow Of The Colossus* film?
I can't talk about it, but I'll say just one thing: I got *Ico* as soon as it came out, and I just loved that game so much. I knew immediately when I read that [Team Ico was] making a new one that I wanted to go out and get it as soon as it came out, too, and it just blew me the fuck away. A couple of years later, I remember seeing in Variety that it had been optioned. I must have been 22 or something, and I just knew, 'Oh my God, if somebody's doing that, I have to somehow get in there and make sure it's done the right way.' It was one of the first calls I made after Chronicle came out – when I realised I could make calls about things. I was like, 'Hey, what's going on with that?' We're working on it.

And what is your favourite game?
I would say my favourite videogame of all time is *Suikoden II* on PlayStation. It was one of those games that made a huge epic promise on the box, and then it totally fucking delivered in every way. The game box itself advertised on the front '108 totally unique characters', and I swear to God there are 108 totally unique characters. The score in that game, and in each of the individual towns, is just the best music ever. ■



The Fantastic Four movie will be Trank's first picture since Chronicle, which dealt with three teens coming to terms with, and abusing, new-found superpowers

WEBSITE
Byte Sized
www.ultrace.tumblr.com

Byte Sized may be more ambitious and important than even its creator realises. It's a collection of videogaming obscurities that's part first-hand account of arcade gaming from the '80s and '90s, part art reclamation project, part nostalgic indulgence. Its curator obsessively tracks down classic game art in the highest resolution possible, even stitching together the best sources for works produced in an era before 25MB PSD files were available online at 300dpi in order to create poster-sized versions of the art from *Wasteland*, *Metal Gear* and more. The Byte Sized Tumblr is one man's hobby, but it has the feel of a project, even without real structure. It is doing good work and, judging by the reblogs, has too few followers, but it's a gold mine for the first-time visitor and longtime subscriber.



VIDEO
Bill Gates vs *Doom*
www.bit.ly/J4Bqcu

Bill Gates stars as Doomguy in this relic from a 1995 Microsoft function. It would be notable just for Gates in a trench coat and wielding a shotgun, but it's also a reminder of just how revolutionary Windows 95 was for the PC as a game platform. He recognises gaming's importance to the new OS and thanks thirdparties for helping "clean up the DOS mess". What followed was 18 years of Windows dominance, which is only now being threatened by Valve's aggressive Linux push. Windows stole the lead once; its next move will seek to keep it there, shotgun or not.

WEB GAME
CS Story
csstory.net

Mojang's chief word officer Owen Hill pens a *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* text adventure with his tongue so firmly embedded in his cheek he's in danger of licking his beard off. *CS Story* challenges players to properly set up their Steam overlay, make appropriate tactical decisions and have a successful game of *Counter-Strike*, but mostly it's just a love letter to the game itself. It pokes fun at the foibles – the impossibility of playing any map bar Dust II; coordinating with suicidal Russians – and wallows in the tiny things that make the simple game of *Counter-Strike* so good even 15 years on. It's about how careful map design builds tension and gives each round a story, the little bugs that players know intimately, and the friends you meet online, no matter where they live in the world.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

An arrangement of other articles on our radars during the production of **E**263

HEADSET
Turtle Beach Ear Force PX4

The problem with PlayStation 4's pricetag undercutting Xbox One so dramatically is there's barely any room for costly extras like a decent headset. Turtle Beach can help with that, though – it's expensive (£149), but its Ear Force PX4 does the job wirelessly and without the cumbersome bulk or technicolour vulgarity of other gaming headsets. Some of the button placement is inexplicable – tucking the power button behind the boom mic and lightweight touch buttons where you're most inclined to accidentally press them, for instance – and Bluetooth syncing is baffling without the manual to hand, but it handles party chat and game audio with crystal clarity even at ruinously loud volumes, and it'll also work with your Xbox, despite the PlayStation-centric branding.



continue

Visa credit
Five-year US visas, normally reserved for internationally recognised athletes, given to *LOL* and *StarCraft* players

Vita credit
With *Tearaway*, Japan's Vita TV and PS4 Remote Play, Vita is finally a serious proposition

The console race
PS4 beating Xbox One sales can only inspire Microsoft to come back stronger, right?

quit

YouTube carpetbomb
Indiscriminate copyright enforcement hits YouTube gaming content. Twitch.tv must be rubbing its hands with delight

Bug spray
2013's trend of releasing games laden with jarring bugs can't continue into 2014

PSN outages
The frequency of Sony's maintenance downtime is unacceptable now that PSN is pay-to-play



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TWEETS

Doom is trending at #2 on Twitter right now! It would be trending at #1 if someone was paying for it!
John Romero @romero
Doom *creator*

All Android microconsoles are 100% certified dead-on-arrival, forever. Just stop it, everyone.
Kris Piotrowski @krispiotrowski
Creative director, Capy

If I hear "immersion" one more time I'm going to immerse my fist in someone's face. #vgx
Olly Moss @ollymoss8
Graphic designer

Day three without Wi-Fi. Wow it is great. The Internet is the worst place.
Ian Bogost @ibogost
Game designer, author



DISPATCHES FEBRUARY

In Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers question the walls consoles erect between players, denounce Charlie Brooker's views of boss battles, and tunnel even deeper into the emerging field of videogame archeology. Elsewhere, **Steven Poole** laments the digital busywork of a favourite app and highlights two games that show how it should be done, **Leigh Alexander** asks if endless list features and 'best of' hunting are helping anyone, and the despicable **Brian Howe** confesses his spiral into the dark recesses of microtransaction hell.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 262

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

Golden touch

When I read in **E**258 that *GoldenEye 007* had received a retrospective ten, I had to stop myself from shouting, "Yes!" *GoldenEye* played a special role in my childhood, joining *Super Mario 64* and *Ocarina Of Time* in a divine N64 trinity. Finally, each game in that trinity had the score they deserved. I dug my old N64 out of the attic, blew the dust off the cartridge and played *GoldenEye* for the first time in years, gleeful in the knowledge that even today, it's good enough for a perfect ten.

Except it isn't. I found myself shooting a lot of people and not much else. *GoldenEye*, in the eyes of my nine-year-old self, was the game where you truly became 007. Bond is a man who always gets the mission done, by whatever means, even if someone has to be killed. That isn't the same as killing every armed man in Russia, then completing the mission on the side, which is what *GoldenEye* had me doing.

Also, killing in Bond films is usually quick and decisive. Rarely does Bond stand there, unloading entire rounds into someone until they finally fall down. Bond only fires a gun when it's appropriate. In *GoldenEye* the abundance and persistent recklessness of enemy soldiers means there is never a moment where *not* shooting anyone is the smarter option.

This didn't matter in 1997: 3D console shooters were finding their feet, and Rare's efforts with *GoldenEye* were impressive. But it's 2013; *GoldenEye* must now be considered against newer games. Compared to today's games, *GoldenEye 007* is just a Bond-themed excuse to spray bullets everywhere. It may have deserved a ten by 1997 standards, but I can't say it deserves one by 2013's.
Colin Peacock

Shooters in 2013 wouldn't be what they are without *GoldenEye* changing the FPS landscape. Once upon a time we defined an **Edge** ten as 'revolutionary', and Rare's finest hour certainly fits that description.

Boss rush

I've always been a big fan of Charlie Brooker, as he is often found defending gaming in the mainstream media. Just recently, he went toe-to-toe with Jon Snow, batting away myth after myth after derogatory remark directed at gaming and gamers. My favourite comment from Mr Snow was, "Aren't all games about murdering people?"

As a fan of Mr Brooker, I flicked through to the interview in **E**261 hoping to read more sense and reason about our shared interest. So imagine my surprise to find Mr Brooker – instigated by yourselves – attacking a gaming staple such as boss fights!

I cannot understand how he can be so dismissive of such a tremendous gaming tradition. Reaching the boss level is (when done correctly) a tense precipice, like Karate Kid on his last shred of health adopting the crane stance. It's about taking all your skills and conquering the impossible; it's about quaking in your boots before a behemoth of might and power, then figuring out how to tear a few strips off.

Boss fights in my opinion are what have made games so great over the years. Where would Mario be without Bowser? A single, middle-aged man with an unhealthy interest in adolescent royalty, that's where he'd be. But with Bowser, he becomes a concerned, patriotic vigilante who puts everything on the line for his country to defeat an alien terrorist. The latter makes a much better protagonist for a game, of course. The bosses from these battles were always more than just colourful characters – they were a welcome break from going through the motions against a variety of henchmen. Bosses were and are a chance for the game designers to throw the player a curveball, to really stretch creativity and test their grey matter.

Some of the best games of our time revere the boss battle. *Shadow Of The Colossus* is nothing but a series of boss battles, with the travelling between conflicts giving us time to reflect on our victory, or ponder the consequences of felling such mysterious beasts.

Where would we be without these great games? Would we still be playing these games without the boss battles? Would Snake feel like he'd accomplished anything without taking a few scalps? Would gamers sit through ten hours of just sneaking and cutscenes? I very much doubt it – everyone but Mr Brooker would be lost. Bosses add purpose, accomplishment and encompass the satisfaction of beating the game. Long live the boss battle. And yes, I do think, 'Oh good, a boss fight.'
Jacob Hylton

In reality it's tired old boss-encounter tropes that need vanquishing, not bosses themselves. How many boss-featuring games feel as fresh as *SOTC* once did?

A real find

I was fascinated by the 'digital archaeology' article in **E**261. I'm an archaeologist, although I look after data rather than digging things up. I run an HER (Historic Environment Record), which every county is supposed to have, to record as much as possible about both archaeological remains and historic buildings. I thought the comparison worked quite well, although I had a few issues with it.

The definition of archaeology is 'the study of human history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of artefacts and other physical remains'. I'm not sure that digital

archaeology is contributing to our knowledge of human history, although it's certainly contributing to our knowledge of how videogames work (and also how stressed some programmers can get). I can see how the idea of layers – stratigraphy – is similar, although I suspect that it's simpler in traditional archaeology than it is in tangled-up code.

The comparison with the Portable Antiquities Scheme is interesting. A lot of archaeologists (Dr Dobson included, I think) have the idea that detector hobbyists are a little roguish, or at least not 'proper' archaeologists. I suppose this is largely true: it's a related hobby, rather than archaeology in its true sense. Once objects are removed from their contexts, what they can tell you about the people they belonged to is limited.

It should be said that there are some metal detectorists who *are* archaeologists. What struck me particularly about the comparison is that if you stated a view like this – that metal detectorists are doing something that's "clearly not archaeology" – in an archaeological context, you'd probably run into quite a few angry detectorists. But if you say it in **Edge**, perhaps you're safe!

The Portable Antiquities Scheme was set up to encourage metal detectorists to record finds, so in that way The Cutting Room Floor is very different to PAS. Perhaps it's more like the Historic Environment Records, which catalogues everything from Palaeolithic below-ground archaeological remains to 1960s shoe factories. Our aim is to catalogue as much as possible the objects that shape or have shaped our human environment, since you never know what will be important.

The main thing that makes digital archaeology different to traditional archaeology is that some of the things are meant to be discovered. When people dig through code and discover things, the creators had to know it was possible someone would find them. Indeed, I remember plenty of 'cheats' published in magazines or passed on by friends that involved complicated button pushing to make something secret happen. Sadly, in my field you never find messages written to archaeologists by people from the past, although it would be cool if you did.
Helen Wells

"In my field you never find messages written to archaeologists by people from the past"

A PS Vita is on its way – perfect for a spot of post-dig *Spelunky*, perhaps.

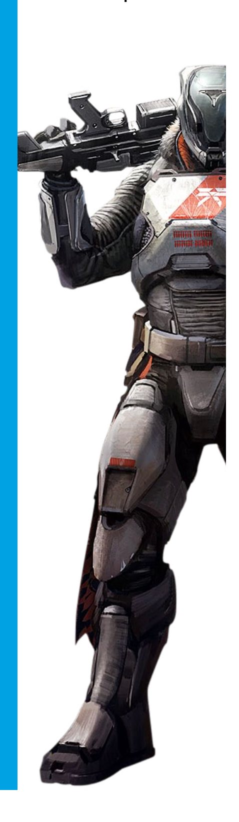
Play nicely

I just wanted to share my thoughts on the eighth-gen consoles, because at the moment, I'm disappointed. I don't want to dwell on the difference in power. History will show that crossplatform games were rarely different between 360 and the more powerful PS3. Those things are not important to gamers in the long run. What's important is the fact that we are getting not much more than a graphical upgrade – again – on the new consoles. It's safe to say that graphics are not enough.

In this world of social integration – YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc – there needs to be more emphasis on sharing and convincing your friends to join you. Games need to be more teamwork- and goal-orientated; they need to be socially rewarding experiences.

There's a reason games like *World Of Warcraft* have done so well, and it's because of the feeling of being part of a team that achieves something. I hope that *The Elder Scrolls Online* and *Destiny* bring that level of connection to the new consoles. Why, after 20-plus years of gaming (and well over ten years of online gaming), can't we play games across two different consoles? *Elder Scrolls* will be a server-run game, the engine they use will essentially receive the same code from Bethesda, voice can be directed via the servers, we all get the same patches. Why is it so difficult?
Richard Cordell

The difference between control schemes is a factor, but the far larger issue is publisher policies. Sony is more relaxed than Microsoft about intermixing between console and PC, but financially speaking it benefits neither company to share its userbase with a direct competitor. ■



Richard Cordell hopes that Bungie's *Destiny* will pave the way for more socially connected online experiences

ONLINE OFFLINE

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Ever, Jane, an MMOG based on the work of Jane Austen, just got Kickstarter funding

I hope it's successful. Certainly the MMO genre has gotten stagnant with *EverQuest II*/*WOW* clones, 'yet another fantasy game,' etc. Maybe they'll even bring up ideas that will make for more engaging PVE content in other games.
Samuel Takara

Interesting potential. I hope they capture a market. It wasn't long ago **Edge** had a feature about the lack of 'games about people', wherein Chris Crawford's *Gossip* was mentioned as an early example. This sounds like an evolution on that theme.
Andy Blair

I respect the game makers' determination to conquer the girls' gaming market, but I have to ask – how many 15–30yr old girls actually give a shit about Jane Austen or her books? Doomed to failure – I can't believe Kickstarter's give-a-shit-o-meter even flickered with this one.
Michael Meadows

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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

It's easy to resent having to work to access content, but Blackbar and Device 6 turn it into a digital artform

Notwithstanding the planet-wide marketing jizzfest over gamification, sometimes things that aren't videogames are too much like videogames. Lately, for example, I have been enormously irritated by the fact that one of my favourite magazines has changed the way its iPad app works, all but destroying its usability. The New Yorker app used to present its articles in paginated form, so you just had to flick from one page to the next. But now there is no more pagination. You have to scroll.

What's wrong with scrolling? Nothing – on a desktop or laptop computer. You can bang the spacebar or the Page Down key to scroll exactly one screen down. But on a tablet, there is no such shortcut. You have to drag the page yourself, pixel by pixel, suffering the subtle eyestrain of text moving under your fingers, until you have decided when there is enough new material to read. So a casually imprecise flick once a page in the old app has been transformed into a far more onerous burden of labour for the reader. Considerably more cognitive and motor effort is required. Given that New Yorker articles can be very long, the act of reading them has thus been made pointlessly more exhausting. Still more ludicrous is this egregious user experience fail when you consider that some people – as one equally angry man on Twitter explained to me – read the New Yorker on iPhone. Manually scrolling through a 10,000-word article on a four-inch screen is no one's idea of fun.

The New Yorker for iPad, then, has transformed itself into something like an appallingly dull videogame, demanding the tedious and fiddly smallwork of scrolling every couple of minutes as the price of learning how the story continues. It has thus become something like a very rudimentary and insipid version of the fascinating iPad adventure game *Device 6*.

Device 6 is essentially a text adventure that seeks to reinsert a rich semantic friction into the act of scrolling and swiping around web-based or otherwise electronically mediated text. The orientation of writing changes as the heroine-protagonist turns corners or walks down stairs: sometimes you scroll down in portrait mode to read more description; sometimes you are in landscape, scrolling sideways to read a single long line. (It seems likely that one of the designers' thoughts was 'What if the horror novel House Of Leaves were an iPad app?') The reason we don't resent this mechanical work, as I resent scrolling through a New Yorker piece, is because in *Device 6* it is thematically meaningful, being analogous to the heroine's physical navigation of her environment. To reinforce the point, sideways scrolling is accompanied by the sound of soft footsteps.

> The New Yorker app has become something like an insipid version of iPad adventure game Device 6

Device 6 also plays with the ontology of the text background: normally a blank expanse of dimensionless electronic white, it suddenly reveals itself to have holes cut out of it, as though it were a physical page. Through these 'windows' we see first, as a foundational joke, the view from a window, and later on all kinds of odd machines or creatively cut-up perspectives of room interiors. With its ambience of Lewis Carroll meets Lost, and its amusingly satirical intermissions, *Device 6* is a lo-fi, high-concept breath of fresh air. It's not so much a text adventure as an eReading adventure.

Another even more lo-fi game can be seen as a companion piece to *Device 6*'s exploration of textual ontology: that is the brilliantly simple *Blackbar*. It marries a very old form — the epistolary novel, in which the story is told through exchanges of letters – with a very modern (though not new) concern: surveillance and censorship. Each screen of the game is simply a letter in typewriter font, with one or more words blacked out (or 'redacted', as the national-security parlance has it). The player's job is to guess what the redacted words are and type them to proceed to the next letter.

This is a very simple kind of game: a guessing game. But it is a surprisingly affecting experience, thanks to the interaction between the elegant composition of the fictional letters and the creepy picture that emerges from the vocabulary these authorities find offensive: words to be censored include 'love', 'small', 'sorry', and even the month of May. (The sheer apparent arbitrariness of all this contributes to the sense of doom.) When you guess the words correctly and type them in, they are no longer obscured by black boxes but highlighted in yellow. Thus, through means of this extremely simple mechanic, the player is effectively cast as a dissident, an anti-censorship protester, and her imaginative sympathy with the heroine is enhanced.

It's a brilliant little game – not so much a text adventure as a word-processing adventure. What's more, *Blackbar* shows how making the player work for more material can actually be interesting. Frankly, I'd prefer to have to guess a word on every page of a New Yorker story than scroll all the damn way through it.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

The list article contains a revealing truth about the way game journalism works, and how it ought to change

Everyone says they hate list articles. As a format, the oft-derided 'listsicle' is presumed to be disingenuously abusing our attention with sequences of arbitrary preferences. People who write listsicles are just leveraging a trendy format for web traffic, say many – the writers could have found a better way to convey their ideas, but chose the easy road. At best, lists are fun diversions for the office, but most would advise you to look elsewhere for real information.

Yet the game industry has its spine in lists, a long heritage of putting numbers on things and then putting those things in order. No event whatsoever in games has been allowed to be held without several 'bests' being proffered, usually by the press, sometimes by organisers incorporating the input of the press.

That's one of the most astounding things about E3, for example: almost every consumer publication gives out 'best of' awards to the games that excited it the most, and there are dozens upon dozens of such awards. Some readers who follow E3 want to know everything there was to see from the event; most just want to know what was 'best'.

The feature rounding up all the 'bests' is probably the most important component of any game website's costly event coverage, which means it needs to be prompt and thorough. This in turn means probably most working writers visit trade shows with the mandate continually in the back of their mind that they will need to pick out what is 'best'.

This makes some sense, or at least it once did – consumers are constantly flooded with game marketing and new releases, and rising hardware and retail costs mean buying advice has become increasingly important. During my childhood, I read neon-embellished, advert-stuffed videogame magazines, paging urgently for scores.

But the cycle of 'best of' lists gets tricky when you examine the role the press plays in bombarding players with marketing materials. Any new trailer could be an occasion for a post on a consumer site. And as the trailer begins, you see the boasting: what you're about to watch was awarded 'best of' and 'most anticipated' by many websites. There might even be enthusiastic quotes from an employee of the site that you're currently viewing.

> No event in games has been allowed to be held without several 'bests' being proffered

Many people think this implies unscrupulous complicity. I don't. There's no doubt in my mind that the 'best ofs' were considered, the quotes were from enthusiastic reporters, and that no illicit transaction took place. But complicity need not be explicit: we attended a marketing event and the result was materials a company could use in marketing.

If a new franchise sequel appears, there is no question that it must be covered, even by reporters who are relatively disinterested in it. A publisher's event is an occasion where writers show up, even if cynically, everyone drinks the free drinks and then probably makes an informative, unsentimental post for the benefit of those readers who might care about that kind of thing.

We think of that as being objective: conveying information even though you have no personal investment in it, because someone else might. In many ways, that 'objectivity' limits conversations about games to the realm of products you buy or not. That's huge. But importantly, has this approach helped the way we recommend games to players?

Many writers had to do 'best of 2013' lists, because it's what we do. Often the game put at number one might not end up being the one they loved most, but the least-controversial recommendation for a purchase. There's still an assumption our audiences do and ought to prioritise traditional commercial releases; as a press corps, we've been slow to recognise the transition in our business and stop consigning indie or mobile games to separate categories that are somehow less than console or PC.

But approaching the list items this way – in diplomatic service to 'objectivity' – means that a lot of lists end up illustrating the games that were unremarkable but marketed the most, such as *BioShock Infinite*. That game was just one of the many discussed online almost quizzically, as readers tried to parse the confounding gap between high scores and their own poor experience. The recommendation lists are no longer doing their jobs.

Lists are polarising and controversial, and tend to mobilise readers in ways that everyday content doesn't – that's why they're popular. And we loathe stirring up the hornet's nests that inevitably hum when we stray away from the established publisher- and marketer-led way we've viewed games in the past. But we're now entering an age when readership may be coming less from people who want to know what to buy, and more from people who want to know what to think.

Players are adjusting to new markets and new modes of consumption, which are in desperate need of good curation. It's time for those who write about and recommend games to step up as curators of all great things gaming – big or small, expensive or free – and leave the consumer product culture in the distance. Let's think about favourites, not bests. That's where lists can be useful again.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

In this tale of depravity, The Simpsons: Tapped Out becomes a gateway to a far darker addiction

The beginning was so innocent. Idly browsing free iOS games, I stumbled across *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*. I'm not what you would call the prototypical hardcore gamer, but after steadily gaming since a NES landed under my Christmas tree in 1988, I'm far from casual, so the hysteria for social games where you click on things had largely passed me by. I was casual-curious. The Simpsons licence was tempting and socially acceptable, and I scoffed at the notion of ever being lured through a free-to-play portal into paying real money for virtual extras. Then I clicked on Download.

Little did I know I was instigating a process that would result, with disorienting speed, in me spending $64.32 on kisses in a much less socially acceptable timewaster, *Archie Riverdale Rescue*. It will haunt me to my grave. After skewering microtransactions in this very column, I had wantonly succumbed to them not once, not twice, but no less than nine times, until a bare-bones dating and world-building sim based on Archie comics wound up costing more than *GTAV*. For my own healing, and perhaps as a cautionary tale, it feels vital to figure out how this happened.

When I began tapping my phone for a few minutes a few times per day, assigning Homer tasks to rebuild Springfield, it was during a hectic, transitional point in my life: in work, romance, everything. As I burned the candle at more ends than I knew it had, these little waypoints throughout the day felt helpful and structuring, like smoke breaks but moderately healthier. I took to it with an avidity that surprised me, scrupulously logging in as tasks expired to get new ones ticking. As the cast of characters grew larger and more demanding, I finally had to turn off the push notifications. This was not only for the sake of my livelihood, but to prevent a hypothetical catastrophe where my phone, lying in plain view on a bar, announced that Apu had finished an eight-hour Kwik-E-Mart shift, eliciting a perplexed look from my date. (All right, that totally happened.)

Perhaps accelerated by my minor public shaming, it wasn't long before my enthusiasm waned. The loop of harvesting resources from prior tasks and funnelling them into new ones began to feel like just another chore, and a pointless one at that. Without notifications jangling all the time, I logged in only when I felt like it. Soon enough, I uninstalled the game, certain I never wanted to tap another Simpson. But not a week later, I started to feel the subliminal pressure of my unfulfilled Springfield, and I fell back in. I still wasn't tempted to buy donuts to speed up task timers, but I needed more tapping in my life, and turned up *Archie Riverdale Rescue*.

> Not a week later, I started to feel the subliminal pressure of my Springfield, and I fell back in

Look, I have a soft spot for Archie. I grew up reading digest editions from supermarket impulse-buy racks, which almost single-handedly shaped my mythology of the American teenager. I think it's cool that the publishers have introduced a gay teen to Riverdale, among the other ways they've modernised a once-conservative institution. Plus, *Archie Riverdale Rescue* happened to be in the midst of a Halloween update. Armed with this long-winded justification, perhaps you can now fathom why a grown man was compelled to download the game.

I waded in with the utmost caution. Even though the social media boxes weren't ticked, I would refresh my Facebook and Twitter feeds several times after completing a challenge to be certain I hadn't inadvertently announced to my followers that I'd made Betty and Veronica BFFs or Archie and Cheryl a couple. Perhaps these clearly defined relationship statuses appealed to me precisely because mine was so ambiguous. When the game diabolically started offering me free characters with discounted packs of kisses, which compress hours of progress into seconds, it seemed rational, even thrifty. It was so easy to turn off my brain and click Purchase, like ripping off a bandage. I was saving time, the most precious commodity! And on some level, I was wishing for kisses to speed through my own life a little towards a resolution.

Of course, resolution never comes in *Archie Riverdale Rescue*. You don't save time with kisses, you just shove more into the time you have. The tasks keep coming, the relationships rearranging. My kiss-buying dementia only lasted a few weeks, and now I'm tapping infrequently. It got especially hard to maintain interest as the character roles dissolved into anarchy. The game is indiscriminate with assignments, so you can make Ms Grundy work on Archie's jalopy. You can host a girls night at Midge's – with Mr Weatherbee and Coach Kleats. You can make Archie and Veronica have a sleepover without censure from Mr Lodge, or Archie and Midge without reprisal from Moose.

But I draw the line at Betty and Pop Tate having a sleepover; that's just wrong. I gasped in alarm when I unlocked Hot Dog, though mercifully Gogii Games had the forbearance not to let him have a sleepover with Kumi. And if you're wondering, publicly expressing this much knowledge of Archie continuity makes me hate myself and want to die.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

#263

HYPE

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content



Choose your own

Player choice is awkward, because where there is freedom to choose, there must also be consequence. It's an uneasy fit in a medium built on escapism, where the ground is soaked annually in the blood of billions of digital men, aliens and fantasy races. Players do not want real-world repercussions when they wiggle their pirate sword in an NPC's guts, so while the industry has iterated engines to handle the glorious framing and illumination of such deeds, it's often omitted to do the same for systems to deal with the fallout.

This is why we end up with sequels such as *Infamous: Second Son* (p40), which renders a whole ending of *Infamous 2* – and thus the stories of those who pursued it – obsolete. Developer Sucker Punch simply cannot accommodate the 'bad karma' ending in the new story it wants to tell, so it has wiped it from existence. It's part of a bold refresh, which has done much to brighten up a once-pallid series, but the studio must be hoping that sheer force of personality will ameliorate the 22 per cent of players who unwittingly opted to strand themselves in the wrong continuity.

And Eidos's *Thief* reboot (p44) proves that merely offering choice can polarise a fanbase weaned on strict rules, with Garrett's expanded moveset attracting Internet vitriol for diluting a classic. Such vocal fans should be pleased to learn that they're being offered an array of further choices on top of their pick of approach: an Ironman mode that grants you but a single life to complete the game, the option to hide portions of the HUD, and even making being detected an instant failstate. Thus the most accessible *Thief* to date could also become the series' most difficult challenge.

For all the headaches attached, studios that design around weighty cause and effect tend to push games forward in ways established templates can't. In a time when new hardware has yet to be defined and graphical innovation alone won't cut it, perhaps developers need to look to such wilder frontiers and damn the consequences.

MOST WANTED

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
MGSV's open world is a departure from past games, but Kojima Productions' mark is evident nonetheless, from the bonkers plot to the decision to release *Ground Zeroes* as a standalone prologue to *The Phantom Pain*'s campaign.

The Witness iOS, PC, PS4
With a puzzle count nearing 600 and details trickling out about the more far-flung reaches of Jon Blow's island, our anticipation has reached new heights. Perhaps most tantalising of all, however, is support for Oculus Rift, which seems like a natural fit for this wonderland.

Game Of Thrones TBC
Telltale's proved it can handle mature themes and multiple viewpoints in *The Walking Dead* – essential skills for taming A Song Of Fire And Ice's ungainly sprawl. A "multi-year" deal with HBO should give the interactive fictioneer the time it needs to conquer Westeros, too.



HYPE

INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

Sucker Punch powers up its superhero series for a new generation

Publisher SCE
Developer Sucker Punch
Format PS4
Origin US
Release March 21

Petulant and cocky yet surprisingly likeable, Delsin Rowe is a much better fit for *Infamous*'s brand of empowered chaos than the forgettable Cole McGrath. But while Rowe, voiced and acted by Troy Baker, has more onscreen spark than his predecessor, he represents just one of the changes in what Sucker Punch promises is a comprehensive overhaul for its superpowered series.

The core premise remains much the same, however. Despite McGrath's sacrifice at the end of 2011's *Infamous 2,* which saved the lives of millions of humans – of the two possible endings, this is the one Sucker Punch has chosen as canon – the government views Conduits as a threat, and has set up the Department of Unified Protection (DUP) in an attempt to control the growing populace of superhumans. Rowe, a graffiti artist already set against the DUP's agenda, discovers that he is not only a Conduit, but one able to absorb the powers of others.

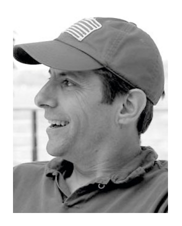
After which his abilities are drawn from the environment, giving players access to an even broader toolset than before, with different powers proving more or less effective depending on the situation. Only two have been unveiled so far: Smoke is a destructive, freewheeling ability that allows Rowe to pass through fencing, leap through the air and cook his enemies; Neon offers greater agility and precision, as well as the ability to run up walls. It looks to work better as a ranged tool rather than a stealth one, though, given that it makes you luminesce.

Rowe's outfit is far from flamboyant, but he's still a world away from the interchangeable stubble we're so often lumped with



In fact, *Second* *Son* is much more colourful than its predecessors in every respect. The murky palettes of Empire City and New Marais have been replaced with a much brighter, sharper one in *Second Son*'s 1080p Seattle. The DUP's characteristic yellow-accented livery makes its soldiers and equipment stand out against the lush greenery of Sucker Punch's sunny take on the Emerald City. Performances are brighter, too, thanks to the work of lead technical director Spencer Alexander, whose CV includes Tron: Legacy. Combined with naturalistic deliveries from the cast of actors, led by *The Last Of Us* and *Arkham City* star Baker, cutscenes and in-game dialogue are now far from the ordeal *Infamous* and its sequel subjected us to.

And apart from a strange jumping animation, both Rowe and the game's assorted cast of NPCs move much more convincingly, too – Rowe in particular switches fluidly between animation cycles as he leaps and sprints about. "The team that has worked on that is a combination of tech and art," says **Brian Fleming**, Sucker Punch founder and *Second Son*'s producer. "Our



Sucker Punch founder and *Infamous: Second Son* producer Brian Fleming



The Neon powers prove mesmerising to watch, turning Rowe to light as he moves at speed through enemies and over buildings. He can draw these abilities from any neon or fluorescent light source, and the swirling particles that accompany them are a visual highlight







ABOVE **Power sets can't be stacked or combined, since they rely on a power source from the environment, but Rowe's abilities can be levelled up, allowing you to tear the destructible environments apart faster.** RIGHT **Rowe's animations flow smoothly into each other as the chaotic action unfolds, even if he still jumps like a creepy vampire in low gravity. For the most part, the same models are used in cutscenes and in-game**

artists needed to become more technical and the technologists really needed to understand the art better for even little things like how people turn themselves."

The effect of blending this additional realism with Rowe's powers is striking, and lends real weight to a series that has often struggled to feel like more than just a toybox. Another important revision is enemy AI:

> ***"DualShock 4 is the underappreciated tide that lifts all of PS4's games"***

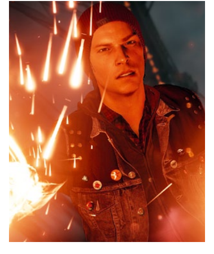
DUP goons will threaten Rowe before opening fire and run for cover when overwhelmed.

"The whole system was rewritten after *Infamous 2*," Fleming says. "It was an enormous undertaking and made the first year of the project kind of a pain in the ass, because the enemies were behaving very badly. But we're finally over that hump and now we're spending time polishing and improving those encounters and giving enemies more specific things to do. We spent a lot of time watching people playing the game, learning how the AI can be improved. It's not one quantum improvement, it's [lots of] little improvements, and they all add up to the combat being a marked improvement over our previous games."

Like McGrath, Rowe will be able to take diverging moral paths through the game. How darker choices will affect his relationship with his policeman brother, Reggie, is unclear at this point, and it remains to be seen if Sucker Punch can maintain the quality of storytelling we've seen so far throughout the whole game, irrespective of our choices.

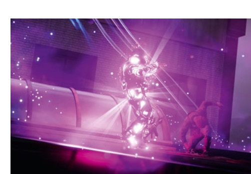
One thing's for sure: *Second Son* is a handsome prospect and will be our next opportunity to see what PS4 can do when it's pushed. As a Sony-owned studio, Sucker Punch is more able than most to focus its attention on a single generation, and the upshot is a game that won't be hobbled by a need to run within PS3's RAM limitations.

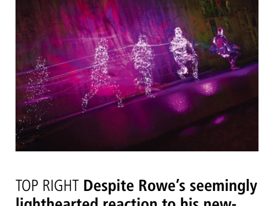
"Our studio really prizes focus," says Fleming. "We're a one-team studio; we've always been that. Anything that steals focus from that is something that we're trying to eliminate, whether that's starting a second team to work on another game, or working on another platform simultaneously. All of those things compete for our focus, so we're very driven by the ability to isolate anything that's a distraction from what we're trying to do." ■



Shock of the new

"The DualShock 4's one of our favourite things to talk about," Fleming says. "It's the underappreciated tide that lifts all of PS4's games. It gets left out a lot, but for me the most important thing that's changed is just the quality of the pieces themselves. The thumbsticks are *vastly* improved over the PS3 – a much smaller deadzone, tighter springs. We're focusing on using the touchpad for some key interaction points, although it's not a pervasive use for us – it's a neat opportunity in signature moments to do something refreshing for the player. Then there's the speaker and the indicator light: we've made some moderate investments to add a bit of novelty and something people haven't seen before."





TOP LEFT **Rowe appears to be a much better freerunner than McGrath, able to scale most walls so long as there are handholds. Seattle's vertiginous buildings should prove a test of his abilities.** RIGHT **Fleming won't be drawn on whether *Second Son* will include anything along the lines of *Infamous 2*'s player-generated content, saying he's likely to "take arrows in the back" if he divulges anything now**

TOP RIGHT **Despite Rowe's seemingly lighthearted reaction to his new-found powers, the DUP's employees meet with some horribly grisly ends at his hands. Being cooked in our own armour by a smoky apparition isn't how we'd like to go out.** ABOVE **Sucker Punch has taken full advantage of its focus on PS4, filling the screen with particle effects that contrast well with the otherwise clean-looking world.** CENTRE **As well as melee encounters, Smoke powers also allow Rowe to fire projectiles and destroy environments to get the upper hand over his armed assailants. Lighting effects are superb throughout**





THIEF

Eidos Montreal prepares to introduce Dishonored fans to the genre's originator

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	Eidos Montreal
Format	360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Canada
Release	February

Garrett has the expected selection of arrows, with water tips for dousing lights, fire tips for lighting spilled oil, and broadheads for headshots. He also has rope arrows and a climbing claw for reaching platforms



Pity any developer that admits its desire to make a cherished series more accessible. FromSoftware fell foul of this loaded term, and now Eidos Montreal's *Thief* reboot has snagged on the furrowed brows of series fans. *Thief*, like *Dark Souls*, is synonymous with challenge, but Eidos stresses it has no intention of dumbing down Garrett's world. It just wants to give those in it more options.

"We want players to be able to choose their strategy situation by situation," lead game designer **Alexandre Breault** tells us. "Even within a single level, it will be easy to switch between aggressive and stealthy tactics [and] easy to run away, hide and wait for the situation to cool down."

Fret not: Garrett hasn't been recast as a brawler. While you may be able to solve some problems with violence, the shadows will always be your greatest ally. "No matter what strategy you're using, you'll need to think about the situation," Breault says. "It's really a game about anticipation. Even though we support more aggressive playstyles, if you just run into a situation without thinking, without even a little hesitation, you'll very quickly find yourself in trouble."

We experience this firsthand during our playthrough of a level that sees Garrett making his way across the city towards a clock tower, pillaging a jewellery shop along the way. A guard patrols an upstairs room containing drawers, cabinets and a locked safe stocked with valuables. We attempt to knock him unconscious with our blackjack after sneaking around a cabinet to get behind him, but miss the swing. Carefully timing our dodges and lunges proves successful and we quickly gain the upper hand, but only until his colleague runs in and knocks us to the floor.

Better planning sees us through a second attempt, aided by the controversial new Focus ability. At the most basic level, Focus functions like a combination of *Mirror's Edge*'s Runner Vision and Joel's focused hearing in *The Last Of Us*, highlighting key parts of the environment as well as the footsteps of guards and civilians who are behind walls, helping you to keep track of their movements and plan ambushes.

It's a finite resource, however. It can be replenished by finding poppies throughout the level, but you'll have to manage it carefully. Assuming you've ingested sufficient opium, Focus can also help you to gain the upper hand during combat, slowing time and letting you target specific areas of a foe's body. Or you can use it to speed up picking a lock or a pocket should you suddenly hear footsteps halfway through a robbery. Don't mistake it for an instant-win option,





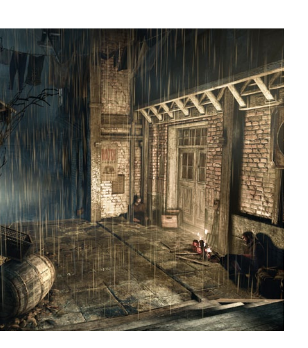


From top: Alexandre Breault, lead game designer; Daniel Windfeld-Schmidt, lead level designer; Steven Gallagher, narrative director

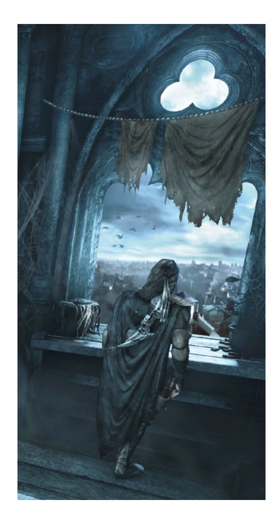


Garrett might not quite ring true in character yet, but he has lost none of his light-fingered greed. While his jobs may occasionally include a noble aspect, his only real motivation is loot





Thief's engine conjures an atmospheric city, its shadows contrasting heavily with lighter areas, while mist hangs above the damp cobbled streets. While some fans have protested the shift from a medieval setting, this is still an appealing world



"The Clock Tower contains all the side content, and a lot of the colour of the world," says Gallagher

however. Lockpicking is represented by three white circles, each glowing brighter as you get closer to being able to set the pin; engage Focus and you'll be able to see inside the lock barrel, but you still have to finish the job.

More potential controversy comes from the takedowns, in which guards meet brutal ends. While Eidos has, thankfully, abandoned QTEs in response to overwhelmingly negative feedback, takedowns still represent a worrying removal of control in a series that has long made agency a core value.

"You can still be detected during those animations; it's a strategy we want players to think carefully about," says lead level designer **Daniel Windfeld-Schmidt**. "You have to pick your battles. Should I run from the shadows because this guard is isolated and I can take him down? Takedown animations are consistent, so you always know you'll need that second extra to make sure you can also grab the body and store it somewhere where it won't be detected by overlapping patrols."

> ***"It's possible to customise the difficulty so that you have to play without being detected"***

This latest build of *Thief* is more linear than the one shown at E3, which was based around a mansion and its grounds. Here, we're funnelled through *Thief*'s newly Victorian-esque streets for the most part, the world occasionally opening up to present more than a simple choice between street level and the platforms suspended above it. The jewellery shop in particular offers multiple ways in, whether that's through the sewers, the back streets, an open upstairs window, or even, if you're feeling brazen, the front door.

There is more colour here, too, the warm yellows emanating from fire baskets and torches contrasting with the blue-tinged darkness. Lighting has always played an important role in the series, and here it is at its most dynamic yet. A light gem in the bottom left of the screen telegraphs how visible you are at any given time. The PS4 version uses Dual Shock 4's light bar as well, making playing in the dark a good idea.

Volumetric fog and shadows crafted by the game's realtime lighting tech provide cover, and you can create your own path through levels by using Garrett's water arrows to extinguish fire buckets and torches. A new Swoop manoeuvre, in which you duck down and cover ground quickly, enables dashes to the darkness, but does little to dispel fears of enemy myopia first raised by our time with the E3 demo. At one point, after some time spent trying to find a safer route, we even use Swoop to pass within a couple of feet of two talking guards in a well-lit alleyway.

In between missions, Garrett can spend time in an open-world hub called The Clock Tower, which contains his home and also plays host to all sorts of sidequests. "It's important for the experience that we wanted for the player," explains narrative director **Steven Gallagher**. "When you explore the area and you're breaking into other people's houses and hearing things you shouldn't hear and seeing things you shouldn't see, it feels that little bit more immersive. At a very basic level, the city hub allows you to prep for the next chapter – you can buy some stuff and upgrade what you have – but it also acts as the barometer of what's happening in the city as well. It's easy to get distracted on your way to the next chapter: you hear a rumour, see something down a back alley or see an open window, and then two hours later you're like, 'Oh, I forgot about that. I'm supposed to be doing something else!'"

Only the finished article will provide a clear picture of how successfully Eidos Montreal has balanced *Thief*'s open world and its missions, its empowerment and difficulty. Early concerns aside, it's difficult to deny the success of Focus and Swoop in making players feel like a master thief worthy of Garrett. If you're really set on relying on your own senses, though, you can turn off the HUD entirely, get rid of Focus and set more extreme conditions for success.

"It's possible to customise the difficulty so that you have to play the game without ever being detected," says Breault. "We even have an Ironman mode where you can't ever die or fail, otherwise you must restart from the beginning." Windfeld-Schmidt interrupts: "We're still trying to finish that ourselves." ■



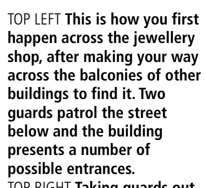
Identity theft

Stephen Russell, who voiced Garrett in the first three *Thief* games, made the character his own, so it's jarring to hear *Assassin's Creed II* voice actor Romano Orzari in his place for Eidos Montreal's reboot. While Orzari has clearly done his homework, from what we've heard so far his take on Garrett feels like a poor copy. Some of Russell's sarcastic inflection seems to have survived the recasting process, but the syrupy, roguish charm that came from his delivery is absent here. Thankfully, many of the guard conversations retain the same mix of boastful folly and drunkenness that made eavesdropping such a pleasure in past *Thief* games.









TOP LEFT **This is how you first happen across the jewellery shop, after making your way across the balconies of other buildings to find it. Two guards patrol the street below and the building presents a number of possible entrances.**
TOP RIGHT **Taking guards out quietly, or avoiding them entirely, is essential if you don't want to find yourself overwhelmed. We've just woken this chap, having tried to pickpocket him while he slept in that chair.**
LEFT **An arrow to the kidneys downs one guard, while the next is about to suffer head trauma. Aggressive acts still require planning, however, which might mean observing guard movements for five minutes before you strike**

LEFT **Garrett's dodge comes in handy when you find yourself face to face with a sword, letting you strike back once the guard's off-balance. Don't expect to be able to melee your way through an entire watch**







Publisher NCSoft
Developer Carbine Studios
Format PC
Origin US
Release Q1 2014





WILDSTAR

Carbine's MMOG challenger isn't afraid to be a theme park



You can fiddle with your character's specialisation by changing your skill loadout. The Engineer can double-down on the power of their robots, or focus on their own exoskeleton and weaponry

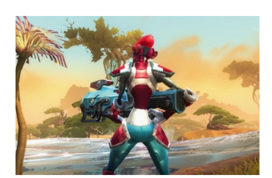
The MMOG didn't set out to become a theme park, but that's what it has become. The term is usually used as a pejorative, denoting something false or, in the worst case, exploitative. *WildStar* is an exuberant and carnival-bright action MMOG that wants to remind its players that there's a fun side to theme parks, too – that it's no bad thing to be entertained, to simply play.

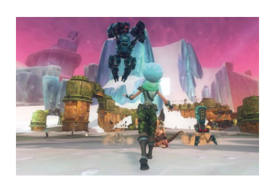
Set in a sci-fi universe rendered with the tone and palette of an '80s Saturday morning cartoon, *WildStar* revels in its game-like trappings, and that is its most striking and attractive quality. The game's two factions – the Han Solo-ish Exiles and scenery-chewing Dominion – are each comprised of colourful and diverse races. Humans are angular, exaggerated and expressive (art director **Matt Mocarski** cites Pixar, and particularly The Incredibles, as a reference point) while the Chua are three-foot-tall, villainous mouse-people that bound like Looney Toons.

On the Dominion side there's also the Draken – hulking beast-people, somewhere between *WOW*'s Worgen and Wolverine – and the Mechari, towering fascistic robots. The Aurin are lithe Exile humanoids with rabbit ears and tails, and the Mordesh are a strange take on the undead, space zombies seeking a cure for their degenerative illness.

As one of these characters you complete quests on Nexus, a world divided into traditional MMOG zones and biomes. The game's structure will be familiar to anyone who has played a game in this genre in the past five years – what does make it feel fresh is the work Carbine has done to celebrate, rather than bury, the theme park beneath.

Grow in power and the words 'Level Up!' explode onto the screen in pink-and-chrome

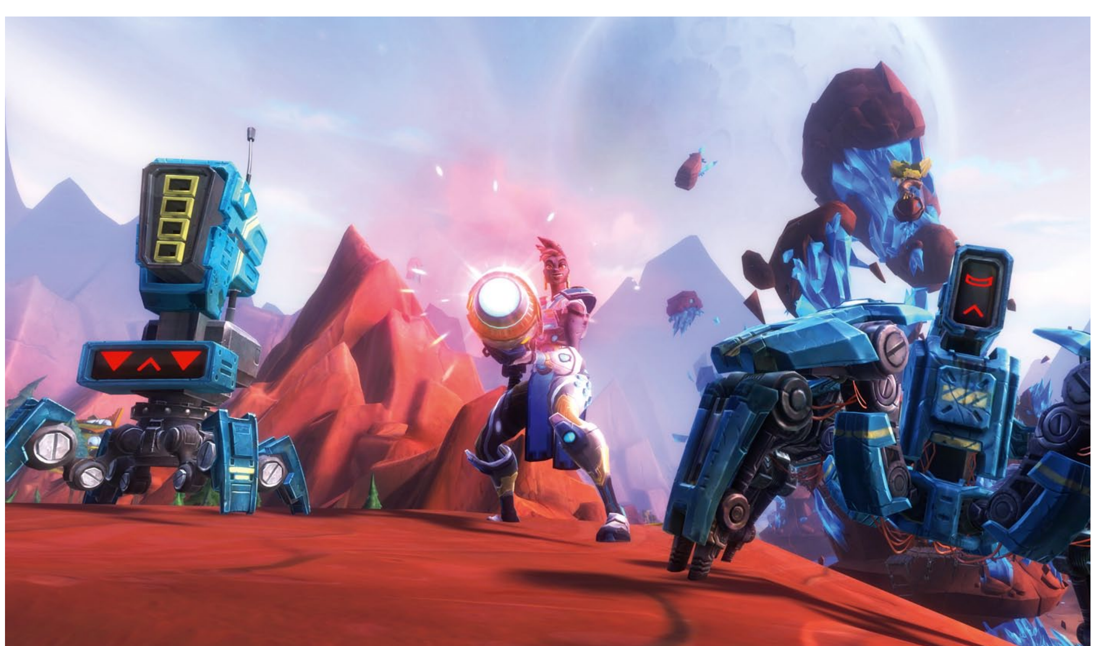




ABOVE CENTRE **The Cassian humans are imperialistic and exploitative, and the game doesn't try very hard to give them a positive spin.** ABOVE **Your 'path' determines which side-missions you'll have access to: Explorers get jumping challenges, while Soldiers hunt boss monsters**



Matt Mocarski, art director on *WildStar*



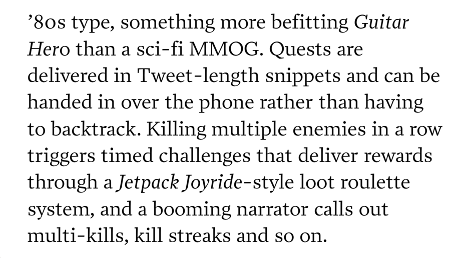




LEFT **The Medic's wide area-of-effect abilities allow you to focus on the game world, rather than the UI, while supporting your team**



TOP **The sci-fi setting is loose enough to allow for swords, forests and fantasy elements when the devs want them.** ABOVE **PvP will feature heavily in *WildStar*. The emphasis on aimed abilities creates an action-game-style pace that would not have been possible on older networking technology**



'80s type, something more befitting *Guitar Hero* than a sci-fi MMOG. Quests are delivered in Tweet-length snippets and can be handed in over the phone rather than having to backtrack. Killing multiple enemies in a row triggers timed challenges that deliver rewards through a *Jetpack Joyride*-style loot roulette system, and a booming narrator calls out multi-kills, kill streaks and so on.

"We decided to add a narrator to draw out this aspect," Mocarski explains. "*Mortal Kombat* introduced that idea; it didn't necessarily fit in the world, but it made you feel like a badass. It reminds people that it's a game. Let's recognise that, and celebrate it."

And *WildStar is* fun. The feeling is that of dashing around an arcade, never lingering long enough in one place to get bored. It may not be enough to shake genre detractors out of their antipathy, but it's a welcome change of pace nonetheless.

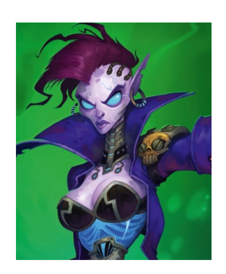
Combat is where *WildStar* gains traction as a serious proposition for experienced players. It's incredibly mobile – almost every attack has an area of effect and a charge period, telegraphed on the ground as transparent coloured panels. You roll, run and dodge to stay within safe areas, painting your own damage onto wide areas of the landscape to counter your opponent. Each class is a variant on this template. Warriors and Spellslingers are the most traditional: melee and ranged respectively, they emphasise mobility and accuracy. Spellslingers have the highest skill ceiling in the game, requiring fast reactions and the ability to combo aimed abilities into one another – a setup that's more MOBA than MMOG.

Recently announced are the Medic and Engineer, the game's take on healers and pet classes. Medics use holographic projectors to create healing, damaging and debuffing fields: they're very much about positioning, and their abilities are accompanied by pulses of digital noise (Mocarski jokes that you can compose dubstep on the fly). Engineers summon robots and a mechanical exoskeleton to control the flow of a fight. They're a good example of the game's Pixar influence – each robot has distinct and characterful animations as well as an ASCII 'face' that flashes red and looks cross when combat begins.

Grow in power and the words 'Level Up!' explode onto the screen in pink and chrome

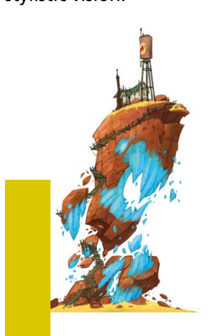
The most significant problem with the game at the moment is a lack of impact. Combat is flashy but the focus on area damage reduces the sense of an encounter between two specific combatants. Dealing damage feels more technical than it should, which isn't a dealbreaker considering the rapid pace of play, but is something Carbine should focus on in the remaining months of beta.

WildStar doesn't have a high-profile licence to bring in an audience. It's relying on attracting players who like the MMORPG for what it is, and will appreciate a considered take on the existing formula. Its message is positive: that theme parks are, ultimately, all about having fun – and that games are, at the end of the day, for playing. ■



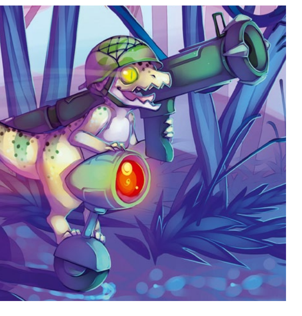
Caricature creation

Obvious Pixar nods aside, other influences on *WildStar*'s artstyle include *Team Fortress 2* and *Ratchet & Clank*. Matt Mocarski worked on the *Jak And Daxter* series, as well as *Legacy Of Kain*, and *WildStar*'s stylised characters display all of these influences. Players may not be able to shape the look as they might in a rival game, but the character creator is surprisingly involved. Mocarski explains that the intent is to give the player the ability to determine the degree of stylisation they want to see. You can dial down the human's exaggerated proportions, for example, to create something more realistic without breaking Carbine's stylistic vision.



Publisher Chucklefish
Developer In-house
Format PC, PS4, Vita, Ouya
Origin Various
Release 2014





STARBOUND

Chucklefish launches the block-construction genre into orbit

Starbound is going to be big. That's a claim that can be made with some confidence: the game sat near the top of the Steam chart for weeks following its release under the Early Access programme. It is a descendent of *Minecraft* – via, pointedly, *Terraria* – that shares all of its predecessors' capacity for viral success. Players mine blocks, go on adventures, and build things: only here they do it in space, across randomly generated worlds. The randomisation of planets and moons is the key to *Starbound*'s potential. Where its predecessors relied on Earth-analogue biomes to give each world variety, *Starbound* includes all of these in dozens of alien variants that dramatically alter the profile of each new territory you lay claim to.

At the beginning of the game, your character's ship runs out of fuel above an uncharted world. This could be a hostile desert planet with long, freezing nights that force you to build a shelter and huddle close to a fire, or a bizarre alien forest where pulsating brains drip from 'trees' made of fleshy vines. You could end up on a perfectly temperate forest moon that has already been settled, giving you ready access to shops and shelter – if you don't cause any trouble.

As in *Minecraft* or *Terraria*, your progress is measured in the types of materials you're gathering and how far up the tech tree you've managed to climb. All planets will include minerals like iron, copper, silver and gold in some proportion – but how much, and how difficult they are to extract, varies hugely. Likewise, the diverse colour scheme of planets furnishes you with a much greater range of building materials than you would otherwise have. You might, for example, take a trip to a desert planet to stock up on the sandstone you need to build a ziggurat on a barren moon.

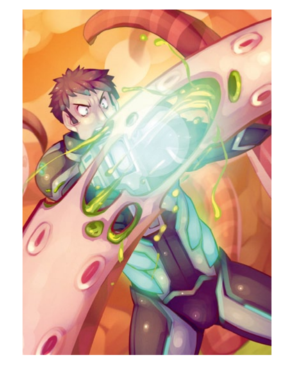
The random generation of planets includes just enough reality to give this 16bit-styled game surprising fidelity. The colour of light is determined by the hue of the nearest star, and if you look at the night sky you'll see nearby planets in the distance. Then there are factors like temperature and atmosphere that might require you to build special equipment before settling a new world. Randomisation extends to fauna, too: monsters are procedurally generated based on the biome of the world they inhabit, and can be docile or deadly. Learning which animals are safe to hunt for food and which need to be avoided is key.

Your progress is guided by a quest system that indicates the next key item you need to build to progress. At specific points you progress onto the next 'tier', granting access to new areas of space and sometimes triggering boss battles or other encounters.

> ***Players mine blocks, go on adventures, and build things – only here they do it in space***

If there's a weakness to this randomisation, it's that the game can sometimes fail to cohere visually. Individual sprites are for the most part attractive and well-designed, and the number of detailed animations is surprising for a game of *Starbound*'s scope. But that won't stop bright-yellow acid-spitting birds from roaming the green skies of a planet covered in dense pink roses. This occasional incoherence, though, is part of *Starbound*'s charm – it's not the game itself that is garish, but the world you've discovered. It's another experience to share.

The game is already substantial in its beta form, although instability and regular patches, some of which reset your progress, make it difficult to get attached to a character. That's a shame because it's a game that will foster attachment. The draw of the next planet is powerful, and the developers claim that there are more than 12 quadrillion potential planets to discover. That's why it's easy to say that *Starbound* will be big: it already is. ■

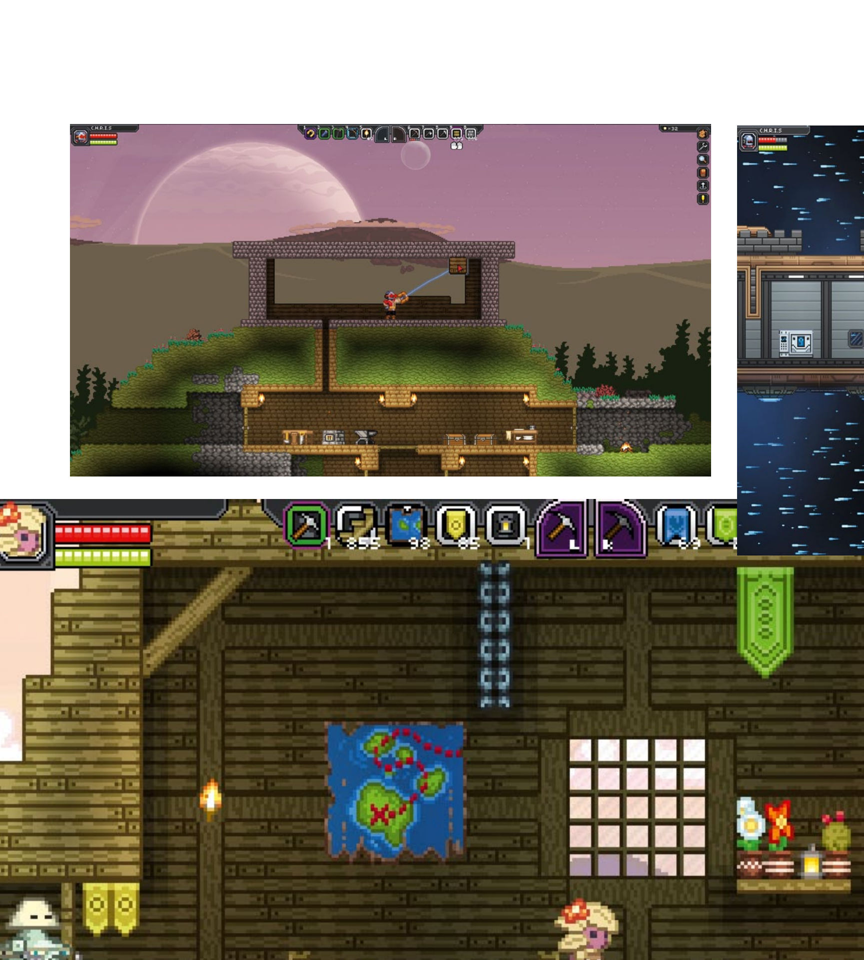


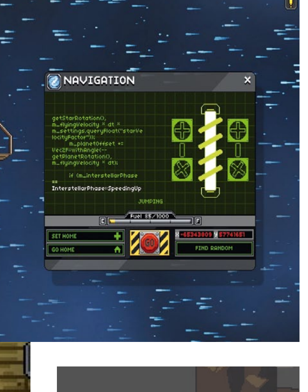
Starbound has six playable races, with a seventh to follow later during beta. Minor gameplay differences help to differentiate them, but ultimately the decision will come down to looks

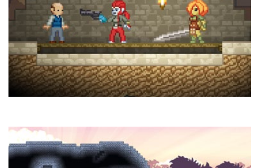


Miner key

Building structures will be the primary way that players express themselves in *Starbound*, but it isn't the only one. It's possible to craft musical instruments and import basic ABC notation in order to perform songs. In multiplayer, bands can form with each player using a different instrument. It's surprisingly effective – and unsurprisingly popular. *Starbound* bands are already cropping up on YouTube, the most prolific being the McDombles, who've used in-game tools to recreate the ending of Monty Python's The Life Of Brian. Runaway success for a game in 2014 will be just as much about cracking YouTube – something *Starbound* is set to benefit hugely from – as it is about marketing spend.







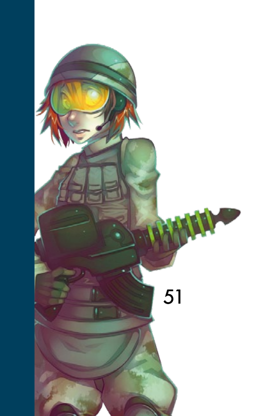


TOP Stellar navigation is limited by fuel, and so in order to explore everywhere in your initial sector you'll want to go hunting for coal. Later on, you'll be able to travel much farther afield. ABOVE Dungeons are found on certain planets and contain loot chests, traps, and procedurally generated bosses. They also provide an incentive to improve your crafting skills in order to upgrade your equipment



ABOVE As in *Terraria*, the world is divided into foreground and background, and you can 'paint' blocks onto either. A basic shelter can be made by creating a box around where you're standing, but in the long run you'll want to think about backdrops and furniture too. RIGHT Certain worlds will be settled before you arrive, and you can also settle a region by designating it as your new homeworld. NPC merchants can provide access to items you couldn't otherwise craft in return for 'pixels' looted from monsters





Publisher City Interactive
Developer In-house, Deck13
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Poland, Germany
Release 2014







While the environs we've seen are mostly enclosed, *Lords*' concept art hints at some huge open setpieces. One in particular sticks out: the giant, calcified hand of The Fallen jutting out from the landscape like a terrible mountain range

LORDS OF THE FALLEN

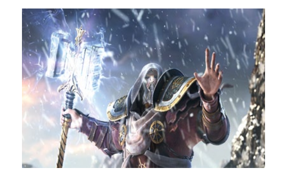
Cutting to the chase – with axes, swords and knives

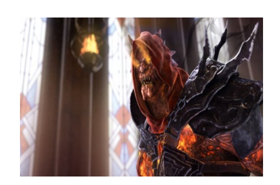
The most surprising thing about Deck13 and CI Games' *Lords Of The Fallen* is how something so technically accomplished – even in its pre-alpha state – could sneak up on us so completely. When the game debuted at E3 in June, focus was pulled from its high-fantasy sword swinging and demon hunting by eighth-gen launch titles and its perceived competitor, *Dark Souls II*. Such was the bustle that people had little time for a pseudo-medieval thirdperson action adventure that occupies a space somewhere between the *Souls* series, Peter Jackson's Lord Of The Rings and Warhammer. And that's a shame, because our first look at *Lords Of The Fallen* reveals a game filled with smart combat, striking style and, most of all, promise.

Lords' story focuses on an antihero named Harkyn, a tattooed quasi-Viking who has been cast out from society for crimes unspecified. The runes that cover his face each represent a 'capital sin' he's committed, singling him out as what CI Games executive producer **Tomasz Gop** calls "a very bad guy".

Without friends, family or purpose, Harkyn lives as a pariah until an ancient god (the titular Fallen) overthrown by humans thousands of years ago dispatches his Lords back to the human realm to reconquer it. Naturally, Harkyn is the only one with the skills to prevent this, and so begins a so-far fairly standard fantasy quest for redemption by way of lots of brutal swordfighting.

Gop has no pretence when it comes to *Lords'* narrative ambitions: this is not a game with an encyclopedic backstory like *Skyrim*. "I don't want to cheat anybody," he tells us. "This isn't a game that revolves around story; it's a gameplay-focused experience." For all its grand fantasy, *Lords Of The Fallen* is primarily





ABOVE CENTRE **Magic is available, but it's not compulsory. Gop describes it like an in-game difficulty slider, with casting spells buying breathing room in challenging encounters.**
ABOVE **The Rhogar are typical high-fantasy villains, all tarnished armour plate and twisted flesh. The Lords are more twisted still: towering beasts that will serve as boss encounters.**
LEFT **While most battles are one-on-one, occasionally the game will pair two demons together. In this case, Harkyn needs to pick off the nimbler aggressor while avoiding the heavy brute giving chase**





Dual-wielding daggers makes it harder to avoid incoming enemy swings, but presents one of the fastest ways of dealing damage to lightly armoured enemies – providing Harkyn can weave his way past their defences



Thomasz Gop, executive producer at City Interactive



BELOW **Heavy weapons such as war hammers are slow, but deal massive damage to enemies too big to move out of the way. Lighter enemies, however, will dance away before Harkyn can bring big arms effectively to bear**

about a grizzled warrior taking on a series of progressively more violent demons, besting them through skill and cleaving them apart with axes, swords and daggers.

To that end, the combat system has been tailored to present just the level of challenge that will, Gop hopes, appeal not just to *Dark Souls* veterans, but also to gaming's less committed masochists. "We're focusing on the guys who love a challenge," he says. "But we believe we can reach out to at least the borders of the players who are [of middling skill]. We want to make a game that doesn't lack any elements of tactical combat, but at the same time isn't punishing."

Even at this early stage, Gop's team has achieved a feeling of weighty physical combat and movement. Harkyn trudges under the weight of heavy armour, visibly slowed by its bulk. Swings from larger weapons, such as hammers, aren't just slow, but really feel like they're testing the limits of his strength. Which isn't to say Harkyn feels underpowered: *Lords* strikes a fine balance between the heft of its weaponry and its hero's combat style, with successful strikes and well-timed button presses unlocking chains of smoothly animated attacks that deal extra damage to anything in their path.

Most of Harkyn's battles will be one-on-one duels against demonic footsoldiers of The Fallen, known as Rhogars. These enemies will come at him in different ways – some might dash in and out of strike range and jab with spears; others are lumbering, armoured shells with swords so heavy that each missed swing leaves their weapon buried in the floor.

In battling these enemies, *Lords* doesn't limit players to any one combat style. While the game has a skills system, players won't be forced into any corners when choosing upgrades. Instead, you can switch weapons, gadgets and armour on the fly, allowing you to respond to whatever threat is bearing down on you. A light, nimble Rhogar might be too quick for Harkyn to land a blow of his Cleric's Hammer, so getting up close with daggers might prove a better strategy. By contrast, daggers are poor weapons against armoured demons – better to let them put all their might into an easily dodged heavy attack, then pound at them with a double-handed axe as they attempt to recover balance. It's a case of finding which murderous key fits which fleetingly presented lock.

It feels crisp, light and fresh, a palette cleanser after years of murky dungeons

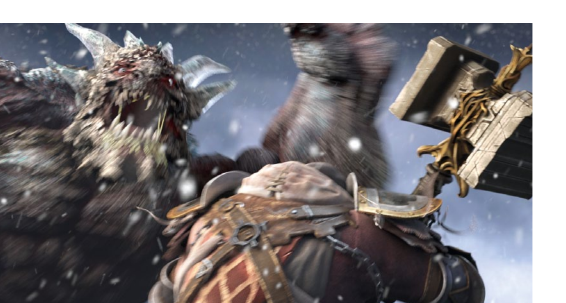
Lords also stands out visually, ditching dull browns and greys in favour of a high-contrast colour palette. In a rare two-on-one encounter in a frozen courtyard, Harkyn lunges, weaves and stabs at an enemy every bit his equal in agility, while putting distance between himself and a heavier-armoured Rhogar giving laboured chase. As the two lighter combatants move, their red capes are believably yanked after them. Intricate layers of armour plate flash in the sunlight, and the mountains and sky shine a cold, wintry blue. It feels crisp, light and fresh, a palette cleanser after years of murky dungeons.

Lords Of The Fallen is a single-minded proposition, a game that eschews anything that might distract from beautifully rendered fantasy characters knocking seven shades out of each other with broadswords. There's still plenty of time between now and its release for technical demons to make themselves known, but as a taste of what a new generation of epic fantasy might look like, *Lords Of The Fallen* is a vivid prospect. ■



Setting your own pace

Given its subject matter and combat style, *Lords Of The Fallen* unavoidably draws comparisons to *Dark Souls*, but Gop stresses that a key difference between the two games will be *Lords*' relative lack of what he refers to as "punishment". If players get stuck on a particular battle, they have magic and gadgetry to help rebalance the scales in their favour, using explosives to stun enemies, say, letting them get in a few quick hits. Of course, if players want to really test their abilities, the game can be completed using a single type of armour or weapon, or with magic abandoned altogether, but this, as Gop says, will "require a little bit more determination".





Publisher Capcom
Developer TBC
Format PS3, PC, 360
Origin Japan
Release June (360, PS3); August (PC)



ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

Fists-on with the newest additions to *Street Fighter IV*'s cast

Yoshinori Ono, *Street Fighter IV*'s grinning mascot producer, is off the project – as is, more worryingly, Dimps, the fighting-game specialist team set up by series creator Takashi Nishiyama to handle the development of each of iteration of *Street Fighter IV* to date. Capcom is unwilling to disclose the company working in its place, but whatever studio it is will benefit from a supremely balanced foundation on which to build this, the final update in Capcom's flagship fighting series. Five new fighters – the fifth of whom is still yet to be revealed – bring the roster to 44 characters, the largest in the series' history. Two new online modes, a handful of new stages and a host of re-rebalancing tweaks for the established cast aim to make this the perfectly balanced package, if such a thing were actually possible.

Three fundamental changes provide the greatest threat to that balance. The Red Focus Attack is a new, more powerful move available to every character. It can absorb multiple hits, instead of the single attack of the standard Focus. The cost for the additional defensive capacity is two blocks of special meter, but when any Red Focus Attack causes an opponent to crumple to the floor, giving every character in the game a way of comboing into Ultra, it's a price worth paying.

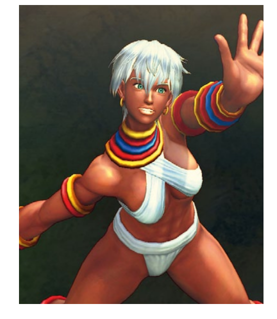
Then there's Delayed Wakeup, which lets you stay on the floor a little longer after a knockdown to put your opponent off their rhythm. It's primarily designed to nerf characters like Cammy, Akuma and Ibuki who are at their most effective when an opponent is getting up off the ground, but making it a universal mechanic risks hurting those of the cast who need all the help they can get.

There's help for everyone, however, in the new Ultra Combo Double system, which lets you take both of a character's options into battle, rather than having to choose between them before a match. The tradeoff is that whichever one you deploy will do less damage, but the choice can offer huge benefits to certain characters. Zangief is the most obvious: one Ultra grabs grounded foes, the other snatches those that jump away, so taking both puts his opponent in a dangerous guessing game. Of the new additions to the cast, it's Elena who'll benefit most. She's the only character to enjoy both offensive and defensive Ultras, the latter of which restores up to half of her health bar. The gigantic Hugo is comfortably the largest and slowest character in the game, but he compensates for his sloth with devastating power, though our hands-on confirms he is nowhere near the force he was in *Street Fighter X Tekken*.

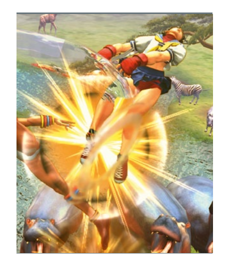
The new Ultra Combo Double system lets you take both of a character's options into battle

Neither, thankfully, is Rolento, although he retains his infuriating hop move (in which he uses his baton as a pogo stick to alter the angle of his jumps) and has plenty of ways to combo into Ultra. Poison retains her hyper-sexualised *SFXT* animations (Love Me Tender sees her wrap her legs around a foe's neck; Kissed By A Goddess triggers a kiss then a face slap and, finally, a kick to the groin) but she is the most immediately playable character of the new set.

With launch months away now that vague early-2014 release date has slipped to June, and most of the game's new features fully working, Capcom and its mystery partner face the long and arduous task of balancing the game. It's something that's happening in closer collaboration with Capcom's community than ever before through location tests across the globe. Daily builds show its commitment to getting this right – a necessity if this supposedly final iteration of *Street Fighter IV* is to stand the test of time like *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* and *SFIII: Third Strike*. ■

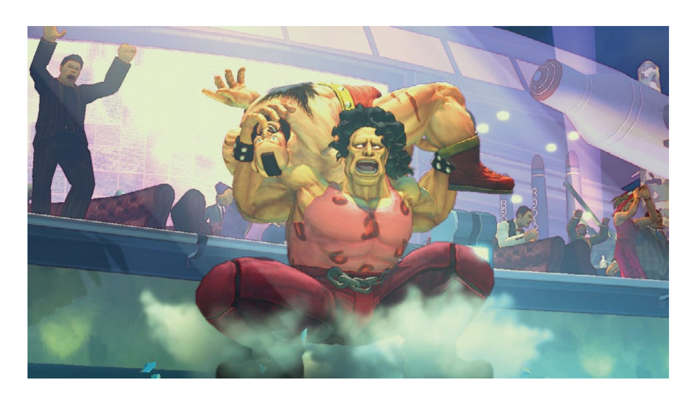


Elena feels a lot like her *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* incarnation, her long legs giving her range. Her multi-hit special moves mean the Red Focus system will be a powerful tool against her



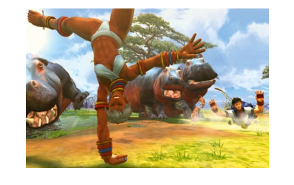
Smells like team spirit

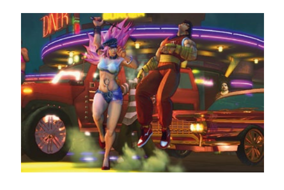
The singleplayer game remains identical to previous versions, but there are two new online modes to fill out the game. Online Training is a Net-enabled version of the offline training mode in which two players can spar, try out new moves and combos together – a useful if belated addition. An expanded Team Battle lets you play online in teams of three, in a form of *Street Fighter* co-op designed to allow weaker players to play with more competent friends. During matches control passes to the next player in line when an opponent KOs someone. Characters' health bars don't replenish between rounds, though, so teams have to strategically organise their order of combatants.









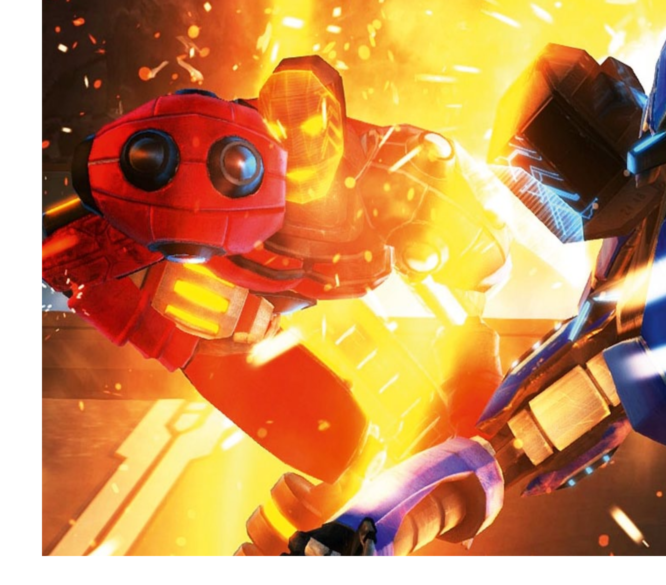


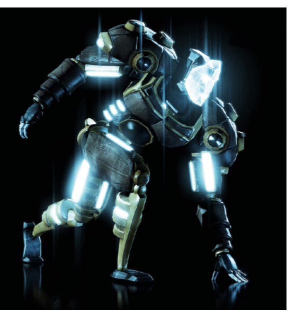
ABOVE **Two new stages provide fresh backdrops against which to fight. Mad Gear Hideout is a *Final Fight*-themed stage starring the towering Haggar in the background, while Blast Furnace sees coal light playing handsomely on the fighters as they battle. *Ultra* will release as a downloadable update for *Super Street Fighter IV* and its *Arcade Edition* expansion, with a retail disc and PC version to follow in August. Organisers of Evo, the fighting-game world championships, say the game will feature so long as Capcom hits its proposed release date**

TOP **One look at Hugo confirms that the new fighters are no mere copy-and-paste from *Street Fighter X Tekken*. He's cartoonishly bug-eyed and gurning throughout battle.** ABOVE **Capcom's renewed community focus led to producer Tomoyaki Ayano releasing player feedback statistics from location tests. Early evidence suggests players are unimpressed by all the new systems, though.** RIGHT **Location test feedback has focused on Poison's languorous movement, and there's precedent for its improvement. Capcom has already buffed Ken's walk speed, and he can now combo into sweep again, but Ryu's still stronger**

Publisher Mode 7
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin UK
Release Out now (paid beta)







FROZEN ENDZONE

Tackling Mode 7's future-sports strategy game

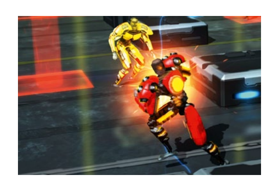
Mode 7's *Frozen Endzone* is not a sports game in the sense that *Madden* or *FIFA* fans would recognise. Yes, it has a ball, robots in chunky shoulder pads, and teams in primary neon hues. Endzones even. But its American-football-meets-*Speedball* looks are deceiving: this is every yard the intensely tactical game of deception and fake-outs that *Frozen Synapse* was. You never take direct control of a player in the thick of the action. Instead you occupy the role of all-powerful coach, planning the moves for your team of robotic pawns to be played out in short, simultaneously enacted phases.

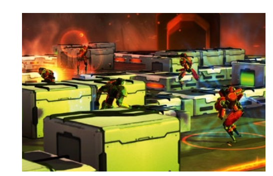
As such, it has something of a perception problem. The game's open beta went live in December, and since then lead designer **Ian Hardingham** has received a lot of feedback from non-players who "worry that it's an American football game, and they don't know anything about American football, or they don't like real-world sports. That's something that we're still looking at addressing, because it's not a real-life sports game and it's got nothing to [do with] American football."

Which invites the question: why make a follow-up to the gunplay skirmishes of *Frozen Synapse* a sports game at all? Co-managing director **Paul Taylor** explains it's a natural result of Mode 7's goals. "Effectively, we wanted to make a game that took some of the elements of *Frozen Synapse*, particularly the territorial physical element of the game, making it much more about reading the map. The sports thing kind of came out of that."

The first months of this year-long beta present only a core sample of the final game, of course. Even so, asynchronous Endzone matches with other humans are surprisingly fully formed area-control tussles, which play

Throws are strictly rationed, yet prove invaluable for misleading your opponents. But since play ends as soon as a defender touches the ball, you can't afford to be anything other than precise with your forward lobs





ABOVE CENTRE **The camera adds plenty of drama to the enactment of your plans. Mode 7 also wants to let players put together highlight reels of matches to share online.** ABOVE **Right now, stadiums are a bit bland, but you'll be able to customise your home turf later**







LEFT **The reaction to *Endzone* has been positive so far. As Taylor tells us: "It's currently selling about twice as well as *Frozen Synapse* did at this point, which is exciting"**



TOP ***Endzone*'s robots already clash with unsportsmanlike aggression, and the coming animations will only add to the wince-inducing moments when steel impacts on steel.** ABOVE **The arcing arrow is a planned throw. If our player catches the ball on one of the larger squares, we'll gain three safe points and the teams will change ends**





Paul Taylor (top) and Ian Hardingham, Mode 7's managing directors

out on randomly generated pitches festooned with boxes and scoring zones.

Players take turns on the attack, each facing the same starting setup and handful of possible actions. In the planning phase, you'll dot waypoints about by right-clicking, which your bots will follow with clockwork precision. A timer can be set at each point to instigate a pause, and a bot in possession of the ball can sometimes make a pass by dragging an arrow to anywhere forward of him on the pitch. Tall cubes will block robot movement and passes, while low ones only impede progress. And just like *Frozen Synapse*, you can map out the moves you expect your opponent to take, and hit the spacebar to see a simulation of the next few seconds before you submit your plan to the server to see it enacted in dynamically framed bursts.

It sounds simple, but matches get physical fast. Tackles are delivered to any robot that passes within a set radius of an opponent, with priority given to the droid that stops moving first. And it's this that defied our expectations, making *Endzone* not a game of breakout runs and pushing your luck, but carefully considered moves and judiciously delivered tackle stuns to create space.

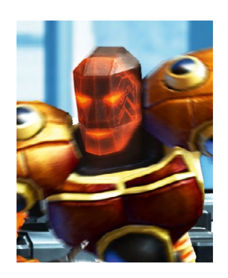
It's pure and deep, although it's tough to score points until you truly understand how to mislead your opponents. And there are a few other minor gripes, too: the identical robots are devoid of personality, and without any team customisation options, it's easy for matches to blur into one. But as you might expect from tacticians par excellence, Mode 7 has already thought this far ahead. "People are definitely looking for some of the stuff we're going to be adding," Taylor tells us. "Things like stat progression and team customisation have been the most requested things, and that's what we're working on right now."

The planned February update, designed to coincide with a Steam Early Access release, will bring a lot of what feels lacking in the mirror match-ups. "The first thing you'll be able to do with the next update is open up the team editor [and] customise your teams to a certain level," Hardingham says. "If you're always going to buy more speed then you can't have as much strength, that kind of thing."

This is every yard the tactical game of deception and fake-outs that Frozen Synapse was

Personalisation options are coming too, and team names and colours are far from the extent of the ambition, with home stadiums, customisable player animations and even a robot facial expression tool planned. "We're trying some weirder tackles and hits at the moment," Taylor says. "We've got all kinds of stupid stuff: roundhouse kicks to ridiculous uppercuts to headbutts to every idea we've had about how a robot can hit another robot."

Perhaps *Endzone* is a closer sequel to *Frozen Synapse* than those misleading first glimpses of the game would suggest. It follows the same template of perfecting a solid gameplay idea before layering on the polish, after all. While it's eminently playable in this pared-back form, early adopters have a lot to anticipate in the coming year. ■



Good sports

Customisation options in online games are usually limited for a reason, reducing the potential for abuse. As such, it's surprising that a tiny indie with limited moderation resources is even considering giving players a custom logo editor. Mode 7 has traditionally attracted "amazingly nice" communities, says Taylor, but he's still far from naïve. "Any kind of customisation tool is going to have the great width and breadth of all the phalluses and horrible things that you can possibly imagine – I'm sure we'll have fun dealing with that." At least part of the solution, however, will be community moderation, he says.



DESTINY

Publisher Activision **Developer** Bungie **Format** 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** September 9



That vague 'spring' release date always seemed optimistic for such an ambitious project, even given the huge development team Activision is bankrolling. News that *Destiny* had been delayed to September 9 was therefore unsurprising. For Bungie to deliver on its promise of a seamless, interconnected, interstellar world, the most important item on its to-do list is a matchmaking system capable of supporting not just the main campaign, but co-op and PVP distractions too, across multiple planets and regions. That closed beta, now slated for summer, is clearly designed for more than just driving up preorders.

STAR CITIZEN

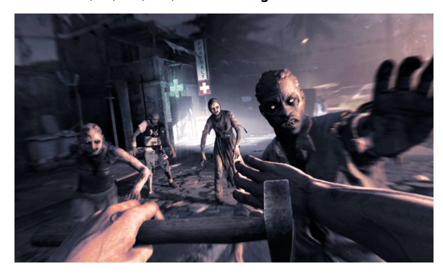
Publisher/developer Cloud Imperium Games **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** 2015



The $2 million raised by *Wing Commander* creator Chris Roberts for *Star Citizen*'s Kickstarter campaign was just the beginning, with an ongoing crowdfunding drive taking the total past an eye-watering $34 million. Roberts may have the budget of a triple-A game, but he doesn't have the time: a modular release plan, which sees the game delivered in chunks, helps keep backers happy. The dogfighting module launched in December; next is combat-free planet exploration.

DYING LIGHT

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** Techland
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Poland **Release** 2014



Dying Light's parkour naturally invites comparisons with *Mirror's Edge* and *Assassin's Creed*, while its melee system recalls *Sniper Elite*'s X-ray excesses. We hope Techland is more inspired by the polished *Call Of Juarez: Gunslinger* than zombie bugfest *Dead Island*, to which this is the spiritual successor.

ENTROPY

Publisher/developer Artplant **Format** PC
Origin Norway **Release** TBC



What sticks out about this MMOG isn't its promised blend of interstellar dogfighting, trade and exploration, but its pitch to backers on Steam Early Access: pay up now, and your stats won't be reset when the game comes out of beta. Making your game pay-to-win while still in alpha is some achievement.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

Publisher SCE **Developer** The Chinese Room
Format PS4 **Origin** UK **Release** 2014



The Chinese Room is making all the right noises about its *Dear Esther* follow-up, promising a nonlinear story, more player agency, and NPCs to interact with. A planned one-hour time limit has been dropped, giving players all the time they want to explore rural Shropshire just before the world ends.

I S O



I O N

>ELLEN RIPLEY PROMISED SHE WOULD BE HOME FOR HER DAUGHTER'S 11TH BIRTHDAY.

>SHE NEVER MADE IT.

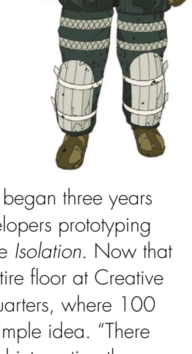
>FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, AMANDA RIPLEY GOES IN SEARCH OF THE USCSS NOSTROMO'S FLIGHT RECORDER.

>SHE FINDS HERSELF ISOLATED, ALONE AND HUNTED AT THE EDGE OF SPACE.

>YOU ARE AMANDA RIPLEY, AND YOUR MISSION NOW IS TO SURVIVE.









ABOVE **This space suit artwork has been adapted from original Alien designs.** ABOVE RIGHT **Operating on a network of behaviours that's baffling in its complexity, the alien took years of work to hand animate in its various stances and postures**





FROM TOP **Alistair Hope, creative lead, and Jon McKellan, UI artist**

Nobody could say Creative Assembly hasn't got a lot to work with. For *Alien: Isolation*, Ridley Scott's 1979 film puts a world of themes and material on the table, with six terabytes of assets handed over by 20th Century Fox, reams of unused artwork from designer Ron Cobb's sketchbooks, music and audio fragments not heard in 35 years, and snaps of Sigourney Weaver's sneakers from every possible angle. But misplaced faith in the power of access and money is a lesson Sega learned at great expense in February 2013, and that's why the world's first look at this new Alien game is a hands-on.

"We were aware that *Colonial Marines* was being released and we were all aware of the commentary, but we were almost foolishly blinkered," creative lead **Alistair Hope** says. "We were making something so different that from a creative point of view it didn't really affect us. You could see some of the blog posts or whatever, but a lot of that was saying, 'Why aren't they making a game based on Alien? Why don't they make a survival-horror Alien game? This is the game I want.' That was massively frustrating for the team, because they were saying 'This is the game we're making!'"

As different as *Alien: Isolation* is, there's a burden of proof this time around and it's a burden Creative Assembly's new team, built almost from scratch to create a survival-horror Alien game, shares. The first experiments began three years ago, with a half-dozen developers prototyping the ideas that would become *Isolation*. Now that team has grown to fill an entire floor at Creative Assembly's Horsham headquarters, where 100 people labour over a very simple idea. "There had to be a more meaningful interaction than having the alien at the end of your barrel," Hope says. "There had to be an alternative to this bullet sponge that just soaks up Pulse Rifle rounds."

Alien is a gold mine. It's about isolation and desperation, about the hostility of technology, about class warfare and feminism, about sexual violence and murder, about suffering and survival, about the ruthlessness of corporations and an unstoppable monster. But more than anything, it's about 1979. Science fiction is always more about the time it was made than the time it depicts, and Alien's 2122 is a future of button-operated interfaces, CRT monitors, flick switches and blinking lights. It's this future that *Alien: Isolation* recreates: a beige and brown analogue world where technology is just another thing to fear, not the dark blue James Cameron shoot 'em up world where guns and a suit of mechanised armour will be your saviour.

"We don't see yellows, browns, pale blues these days," UI artist **Jon McKellan** says. "You don't often see sci-fi games with mustard walls,



DUAL SHOCKS

Assassin's Creed IV players will instantly discount *Isolation*'s PS4 touchpanel map, but the console gets two gimmicks that enhance the tension. "The first time I played the PS4 version and we had the [controller's] light flashing with the motion tracker, it was indescribable what that did to my experience," lead designer Gary Napper says. "It turns green when you take the motion tracker out, and each time something happens, it flashes. Sitting in a dark room and having it flash, with the ping coming from the controller as well… I didn't think it would have that much of an effect on me, but it was really, really cool."

"THERE HAD TO BE A MORE MEANINGFUL INTERACTION THAN HAVING THE ALIEN AT THE END OF YOUR BARREL"

but it's unique and feels good. It belongs there, but other films in the franchise never explored that. To us, it's something distinctly Alien and it had to be in the game."

Alien: Isolation's look is informed by one rule above all others: if it couldn't be built in 1979, it's not in the game. Props such as the game's hacking device and motion tracker were built the way they would have been built on the set of the movie, with virtual black paint and stencils and duct tape wrapped around handheld televisions or old war radios. "When you put that stuff in the game, the lo-fi style starts to become a gameplay element as well," McKellan says. "The motion tracker could've been a hi-res element in the bottom corner, but that would have represented a high-fidelity HUD inside some visor. Instead, we ended up with this bulky box that only does one thing, and even then you have to point it in the right direction. It gives it a tangible feel and makes it a gameplay element, rather than just a choice of style. This chunky box is your lifeline."

In Creative Assembly's demo, that motion tracker is Amanda Ripley's only tool. At the very fringe of humanity's expansion into the galaxy, the Seegson corporation's Sevastopol space station has taken delivery of a flight recorder recovered from the debris left when Amanda's mother destroyed the USCSS Nostromo and the ore refinery it was towing. When the younger Ripley arrives, she finds the station mostly empty, its human inhabitants – and the Seegson 'Working Joe' androids responsible for maintaining the station – scattered. She soon learns that every living thing aboard is being hunted by a single alien creature, and while those Joes and the humans will present their own problems, it's the ten-foot monster Creative Assembly has built that will be the focus of the horror.

"We have a lot of callouts to the original film," lead designer **Gary Napper** says. "Just like the movie, there are other threats present on the station we have to worry about. But the original premise was always Amanda Ripley, the flight

ABOVE **Seegson's 'Working Joes' are mass-produced androids with only basic human features. In-game advertising touts their trustworthiness and reliability, but with their Westworld-like inhumanity, they can only be a threat to Ripley. Never trust a '70s sci-fi android**

"THE NETWORK OF BEHAVIOURS IS SO INSANELY COMPLICATED, THE THING IS ALMOST SENTIENT"

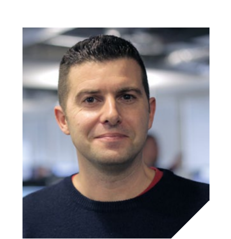
recorder from the Nostromo and the alien. We came up with all these great ideas for stories, big events and stuff, but each time we looked at it and came back to, 'But it's the alien I'm terrified of.' All this stuff is supportive, but this story is all about the alien."

And that's to say that, yes, *Alien: Isolation* has a fire button, so yes, there are guns in the game, but you won't be shooting often. Ammunition is limited to a handful of rounds at a time – *The Last Of Us* not *Call Of Duty*, says Hope – and while gunfire might be useful against the inevitably homicidal humans or those Working Joes, the alien shrugs off anything you throw at it. This is the biggest regular alien ever designed, standing ten feet tall, and it's intimidating enough to freeze your trigger finger in place. *Alien: Isolation*'s creature is absolutely, instantly deadly. If it catches a glimpse of you, or hears a sound, it will investigate; if it sees you clearly, it will attack at full speed; if it catches you, you will die.

"The alien is systemic across the board," Napper says. "We can just drop the alien into an area and see how it behaves. It knows when it sees something and it knows when it just suspects something. It doesn't have to be the player – it could investigate other things on the station. Obviously, we bookend certain areas to give you an objective, but most of the time the alien is in the world and it's hunting you. You'll acquire some abilities you can use to defend yourself for a while, but then suddenly the alien stops attacking you. It stops doing what you thought it was going to do. You're looking at this alien and something's changed. It *learns*."

"It's a living thing," lead artist **Jude Bond** says. "We review the game every day in a darkened room, and every day someone shrieks





FROM TOP **Gary Napper, lead designer, and Jude Bond, lead artist**



and leaps out of their chair, because you don't know what's going to happen. Yes, it's a piece of AI and it has parameters we can tune, but the alien's network of behaviours is so insanely complicated, the thing is almost sentient. There's a difference between artificial intelligence, where we know what its parameters and behaviours are at a glance, and it being so sentient we have to dig into the code just to find out why and how it did what it did during our playtests."

We see the alien's decision-making tree as a mess of possibilities laid out on the designer's screen – a three-dimensional abstract explosion of decisions the creature can make on the fly. Your best option is always to hide; Ripley's few defensive options will be swiftly learned and prompt increasingly dangerous and unpredictable reactions, sending the xenomorph into the vents, up to the ceiling, or even lying in ambush. But the very same intelligence that makes the alien so difficult for Creative Assembly to understand after those night-time playtests opens the door to exploitation by smart players.

"You might hide in a vent," Hope suggests, "but the alien can come in there with you. That's a massive moment in our game. You realise you're not safe anywhere. But when the alien is hunting you, he doesn't hear your position, he hears the noises from the vent. So he goes to the mouth of the vent to investigate."

There are no vents in Creative Assembly's demo, built as it is to prove a point. There is no crafting system, no weapons and no other characters either, all of which have been stripped out to demonstrate just how well *Isolation*'s key system works. You are in space, you have a job to do, and you are being hunted.

IMPLANTING

After finishing *Viking*, Alistair Hope and Jude Bond worked together with a small team to develop a survival-horror prototype designed to sell Sega on the notion of letting them play with the Alien brand it had recently acquired. "Not that we were really prepared to make it," Hope says. "We were in a position to make it, but we didn't have the team or the tools."

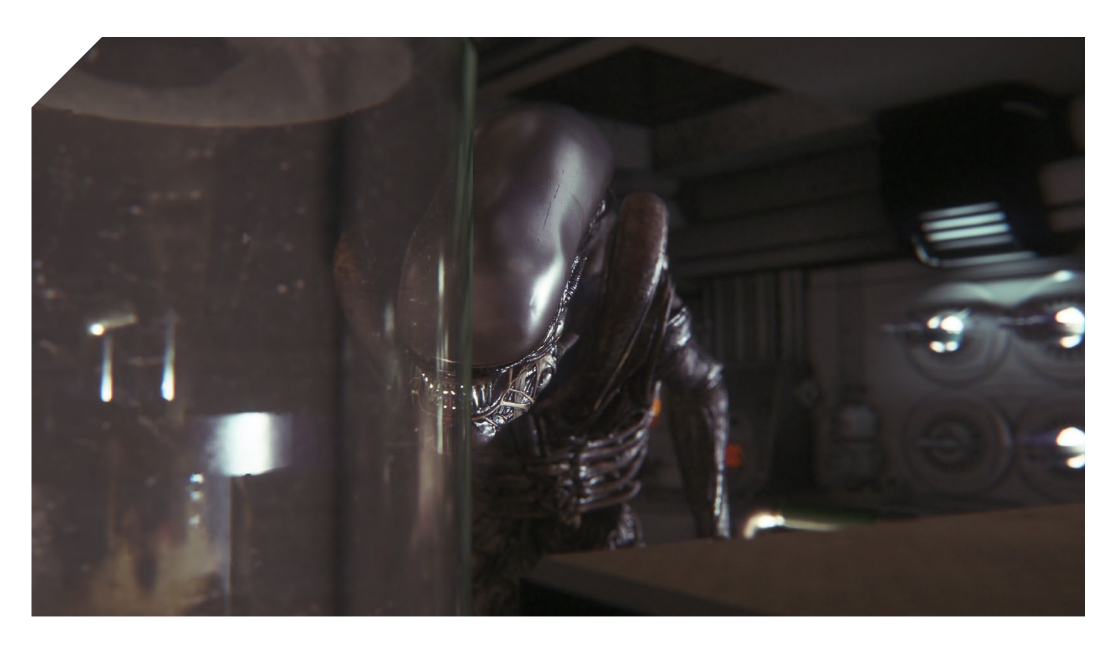
In six weeks, a "handful of guys" put together a proof of concept, which in its very earliest forms had a player-controlled xenomorph in place of the complex decision-making tree that would eventually dictate its behaviour. The decisions made by the alien player in those miniature games of hide and seek would later form the basis of the creature's AI.

"In a way, that was just us being fanboys, just having a chance to build some alien environments," Hope explains. "But that little tech demo went a bit viral within Sega, and suddenly it seemed like this pipe dream of making a game based on the original Alien [film] started to get some momentum."

The Internet will almost certainly ask an entirely legitimate question at this point: why let a strategy game studio make a survival-horror game based on one of Hollywood's biggest properties? "Strategy game studio?" Jude Bond asks. "We used to make sports games, until we didn't."

He's right: long before *Total War*, Creative Assembly made *Rugby World Cup 95* and ported *FIFA* to DOS. In recent years, the studio has dabbled with thirdperson action in *Spartan: Total Warrior* and *Viking*, but it's a new team behind *Alien: Isolation*, one home to developers from Bizarre Creations, Black Rock, Crytek, Ubisoft, Realtime Worlds and more. "We have had to hire for this project," Bond says. "We've had a lot of grief from production saying, 'Why is that seat not filled?' Because people just weren't right for the job. We've been very picky."

"When we started, we were just a couple of guys crammed in with the *Total War* team," Hope says. "As they grew, we were getting pushed further into the corner. Now we've got our own floor and we're about 100 strong, and building the team has been a bittersweet tale, I suppose. There have been some British devs that have had to close, and we benefited from that. At least we could find work for some very talented people."



"EVERY DAY SOMEONE SHRIEKS AND LEAPS OUT OF THEIR CHAIR, BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN"

PLATFORMS

Isolation is planned for release in November across PS3, 360, PC, PS4 and Xbox One. "A little while back, we used to be able to put them side by side and play guess the platform, because they were almost identical," Hope says. "We've been able to squeeze every last bit of power out of those old machines, but as we've got later versions of the [new] hardware we've been able to take advantage of some of the enhancements. The core experience is identical, though. For many years, the PS3 and 360 builds were our only console builds, so it was important to us that they would be great. That's why it's all done in-house."



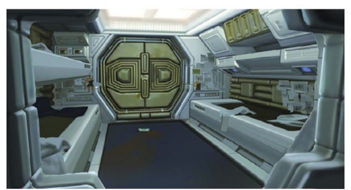




ABOVE **A bespoke engine has allowed Creative Assembly's team to replicate the movie with near-perfect accuracy.** LEFT **Computers, toys and other props all belong in an analogue world. Print media in 2137? We'll see**



ABOVE **This is the most detailed alien ever built for a videogame. Look closely at its head in the right light and the carapace's translucency is revealed. A humanoid skull lies beneath, just as Giger's designs suggest.** LEFT **The motion sensor is a more solid gadget than the movie's improvised devices. It's Ripley's best tool for survival, which only makes the moment when you have to survive without it more inevitable**







ABOVE **Photographs, calendars and other memorabilia are hand-drawn rather than being rendered or photographed.** LEFT **Habitation spaces mirror the Nostromo. Both were constructed in the same era in-universe, and were meant to last decades**

The Jerry Goldsmith flute theme from Alien plays as Ripley enters the station's Hazard Lab. With the power failing, she searches for a cutting torch to access the door's emergency release handle, then makes her way to a lower deck, moving from the softer, smoother habitation quarters into the harder-edged scientific space.

"There were four environmental archetypes we identified aboard the Nostromo to start with," Bond says. "There's Habitation, which is the canteen area with the padding; Science, which is the medical bay area; Engineering, the bowels of the ship; and Technical, which is the computing space. They were our four areas; we created a fifth and they've all got a life of their own. I think we've taken stock of the film so carefully that we genuinely understand how it was put together, prop by prop."

Those props litter the spaces humans occupy. There are tools and toys, family portraits, girly calendars complete with '70s perms, pens, printouts, notes, crockery and cutlery, and storage containers stuffed with things Ripley might use if only the crafting system were turned on. Every corridor and room is built like similar spaces from the movie – interstellar prefab, constructed by the lowest bidder – and all of it is based off those Pinewood sets and Ron Cobb's original pen-and-ink designs. "Cobb had a very distinctive visual style," McKellan says. "It was very architectural, with careful lines using felt-tip pens, with bold graphics against stark shapes. We decided to create all our concept art in the same style, using felt tips – or digital versions of them – so that we could think the way he would think and maybe arrive at similar decisions."

That same attention has been lavished on the alien, which we see in a rare close-up when it makes its appearance in the almost pitch-black Science area. Much of the work that's gone into the alien will be invisible to players in a game where success means never seeing it at all, instead keeping the creature at a distance using Ripley's bulky motion tracker. "That's your lifeline, your one piece of equipment," Napper says. "I think it's brilliant that when you see the alien's dot and the dot marking where you're supposed to go line up, you panic. The alien's always complicating simple jobs. When the fact that two dots on the screen line up terrified us, I realised we've managed to nail it."

This, then, is a scene from the movie brought to life – the alien obstructing Ellen Ripley's escape

ENGINEERING THE FUTURE

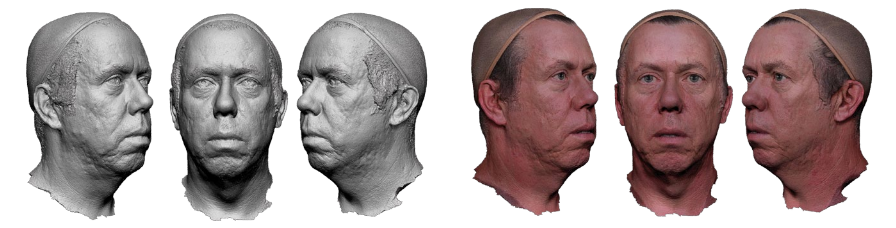
Hope says his team knows Alien better than anyone else on the planet. He says it as a joke to illustrate Creative Assembly's almost absurd attention to detail, but it's undoubtedly true. No matter how much you love Alien, no matter how many interviews you've read and how much art you've seen, Creative Assembly has seen more.

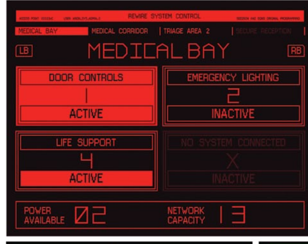
When development began, it was given the keys to an archive of material never seen outside of 20th Century Fox's vaults. While HR Giger's name is the one most associated with Alien's design work, it's Ron Cobb who defined the film's future. Cobb referred to himself as "a frustrated engineer" in an online interview, and it shows in the pen and paper designs for Alien's sets and iconography, duplicates of which are spread across UI artist Jon McKellan's desk.

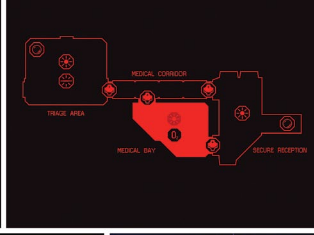
"There was quite a lot of that didn't make it into the film for quality or budget reasons," McKellan says. "Lots are just variants of themes that did make it in, like these iconic Nostromo patches and the little pin badges they wear; there are lots of variants of those. We've got those sketches, and you can put them together to see what Cobb was thinking when he made them."

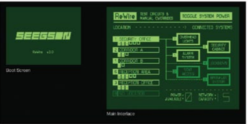
That attention to detail extends to the work done behind the camera during the summer and autumn of '78, to Derek Vanlint's cinematography, and to the lighting and the colour grading of the film itself. Meticulous hardly covers it. "We are aware of when it was made," Bond says, "so we are conscious of what lights we should be using, what the colour temperature of those lights should be. There are no LED lights in our game. We've appropriated a lot of the production methodology of the original film, so this feels like the real place. Not the real place, but the reality [you see] onscreen."

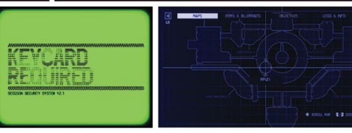
"And there are things in the processing that were different back then," McKellan adds. "In Alien and other movies of the time, you're seeing red, green and blue making up the pattern of noise over a blue object, but in a modern effects-driven film like Transformers, it's all corrected. It's a pure blue. What's happening in Transformers is you have a grain on the film and they've colourised on top, but what's happening in Alien is that they filmed something blue and you've got the grain on top of everything. So, of course, we apply our noise grain [in] postprocessing after the colour."









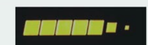


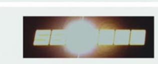
ABOVE Every human face in the game was laser-scanned from a real actor or Creative Assembly staffer and unaltered: a digital recreation to achieve a degree of analogue authenticity. LEFT User interfaces are all vectors and scan lines on displays often built to show shades of only one colour. BELOW LEFT The Seegson Corporation's logo is another digital recreation of an analogue artefact. The word 'Corporation' wobbles a little beneath the Seegson name in the video commercials. BELOW ***Alien: Isolation***'s environment art was drawn on a tablet using virtual felt tips to replicate Ron Cobb's original Alien style









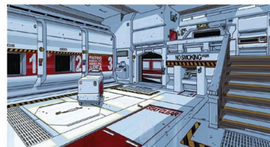








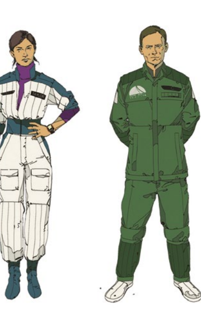


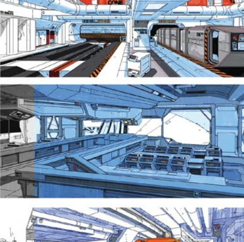


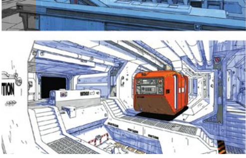


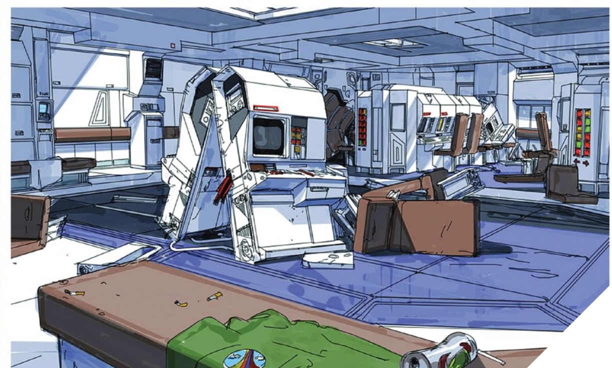














ABOVE **The creature has over 20 context-sensitive kill actions, depending on whether it digs Ripley from a locker, chases her down or attacks head-on.** RIGHT **Environmental storytelling is everywhere in *Isolation*. Every room has history and a purpose**





"THE EASIER PATH WOULD HAVE BEEN AN ON-RAILS ROLLERCOASTER SCRIPTED EXPERIENCE WITH SCARES"

from the Nostromo – forcing Amanda Ripley to take a circuitous route to her destination. And so you crouch, moving in shadow as the alien hunts; hiding in lockers, holding your breath as it sniffs at the door; keeping the blip on your motion tracker as far away as possible. Every hunt is different to the previous encounter.

"That introduction is pretty obvious, but there are moments in the game where you just realise the alien is in the same space as you," McKellan says. "You hear a noise and you think, 'This is happening now.' You can't predict it. We capture video footage for internal stuff and we say we're going on safari, because we don't know what it's going to do next."

The working spaces are built as loops crossed with alternate pathways to give the massive alien room to hunt and players space to hide. Without realising it, you're holding your breath as setback follows setback. When you evade the alien and reach the airlock, it closes just before you enter and gravity temporarily fails. Once it's restored, you're forced back through the same space and once more into the path of the monster to reach the second airlock, which – in a game where technology is as dangerous as the xenomorph chasing you – won't open until it has properly cycled. Of course, this is a process it signals with a bellowing computer voice and flashing lights, drawing the attention of the creature right to Ripley's location.

Again, you retreat into the shadows, hiding as close to the airlock as you can bear. You peek out from behind cover as the creature inspects the cycling airlock, but peek just a moment too long, drawing its attention. It moves closer, pauses, turns away, then suddenly turns back and rushes at your hiding spot, that systemic AI rethinking its earlier decision with terrifying effect. Staying low, you react only on instinct, creeping to one side of some unidentifiable machinery as the alien's heavy footsteps land on the other. As the airlock's cycle finishes, you make a dash to the safety of the tiny chamber, closing the door behind you

DEEPLY UNSETTLING

The team at Creative Assembly won't be drawn on the *Aliens: Colonial Marines* fiasco, but the subtext is there, so close to the surface it's almost just text. "I think one of the strengths [of our game] is that it's not like we retconned and rewrote parts of the history," Napper says. "This is a character that's pretty vital that we're able to explore without breaking continuity."

Placing Amanda Ripley, played by *Remember Me*'s Kezia Burrows, at the centre of the game addressed a key part of the series mythology: a female protagonist. Even before there was an Amanda Ripley or any plot to speak of, the very first build's 'crash test dummy' had a ponytail. Ellen Ripley's role in James Cameron's Aliens was dictated by her absence from Amanda's life and her failure to be there as a mother. That the final scene is mother vs mother is critical and what makes the conflict meaningful. The same holds true for Alien.

"The part of [Ellen] Ripley was created without gender, but it wasn't a blasé decision to cast a woman in role," Bond says. "There are echoes throughout the film of that: matriarchal themes, sexual imagery, the ship's computer is called Mother, Giger's art. When Ash tries to kill her, he's forcing a porno magazine down her throat, which isn't exactly subtle. They go on and on."

Alien screenwriter Dan O'Bannon once said, "I'm not going to go after the women in the audience; I'm going to attack the men. I'm going to put in every image I can think



of to make the men in the audience cross their legs. Homosexual oral rape, birth, the whole number."

In Creative Assembly's demo, your one close-up look at the monster briefly steals control from the player and sends Ripley scurrying under a desk to hide as the alien's 15ft tail slams between her legs and drags up her body. It's a moment designed to provoke a disgusted kind of horror – the same feeling of being violated Dan O'Bannon wanted from his script – but Ripley shakes it off, grabs her tools and gets back to work.

"To me, a strong female protagonist is part of the identity of the franchise," Bond says. "It wouldn't be Alien without that." Indeed, without a Ripley, the symbolism of both movies – and the game – would collapse and you'd be left with nothing but a colonial marine firing a Pulse Rifle into endless hordes of aliens.

TUNNEL VISION

Ripley's motion tracker is the entirety of the game's HUD. A bulky green-screened monitor with a handle, it displays her current waypoint around its outer edge, the exact location of movement ahead of her, and a rather more ambiguous indication of motion to her sides and rear. Using it shrouds environment with a convincing depth-of-field effect, making it inefficient to leave the tracker on, and so using the device becomes a choice: whether to see more motion in abstract or to see less with your own eyes. A squeeze of the left trigger shifts your focus between the monitor and the world, and only by switching between the two can you get a clear picture of the danger that you're facing.

with the alien at your heels. It's a small victory when the only door out leads into space.

Creative Assembly – with a rugby game, *Spartan: Total Warrior* and a decade of *Total War* behind it – might be the studio least likely to make a successful Alien horror game, but it's on to something here. *Isolation* is a game of tension and release over and over again, with greater pressure following every brief moment of safety.

There's a passion at the studio that approaches compulsion, but the same seemed true of the previous Alien game Sega published. Here, though, the team members developing the game are as on show as their passion for it. They're the ones with the VHS copies of Alien stacked on desks, with discarded TVs burnt out by powerful magnets to capture just the right kind of CRT distortion, with a muted loop of the Alien Blu-ray running all day on a big screen, and with the London Philharmonic on speed dial. They're the ones whose own faces were laser-scanned onto the game's human NPCs, and the ones who spent years on forums just fighting the urge to click Reply. No TimeGate debacle seems likely.

"It's been frustrating and exciting, because players keep saying what Alien game they want, and they're describing a game that's very close to the game you're working on. You're constantly resisting hitting Reply to say, 'We're making it; it's incredible,'" Napper explains. "The easier path would have been an on-rails rollercoaster scripted experience with scares and blood everywhere; it would have been easy and predictable, and it probably would have sold. But today people came out of the demo having the same conversation you have after playing a great multiplayer game, but they were talking about our alien, and all of them had different experiences."

So, one more time, just which sneakers does Ripley wear? "There's a debate over whether they're Converse or PF Flyers," Hope says.

"We're not sure they're what everyone thinks they are," Bond says. "They have different lace-ups, they have additional…" Hope interrupts: "Was it Converse? I think we said it was Converse." An argument ensues, with the final word being only that Amanda Ripley wears the same style as her mother, that Alien's wardrobe department had modified whichever sneakers it used as a base, and that both the original costume designer and Creative Assembly's art team are working from a classic piece of design.

"A big part of Alien, for all the '70s aesthetics, they did choose timeless designs," Bond concludes. "They started with things that are classics that had already been around forever. T-shirts aren't going anywhere. Sneakers that were around since the '30s weren't going anywhere. It's funny, because you watch Alien, and it still looks great and current, save for the odd hairstyle. You look at Aliens and Alien 3 [and] they look dated. It's not because they were poorly made, it's because they were of the time and not timeless. Alien is timeless." ■

ABOVE **Building human spaces to proportions large enough for a ten-foot alien to navigate was a challenge solved by art design and the creature's hunched posture. The alien can take a corner at full sprint speed, making it more agile in the small spaces than any human**



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NINJA THEORY

The duo behind *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* discuss core gamers, collaborating with western studios, and raising new talent after almost three decades making games

❶ Keiji Inafune began his career in 1987 as an illustrator on *Street Fighter*, before moving on to the *Mega Man* games, which established him as one of Capcom's leading talents. As a corporate officer he shaped countless Capcom titles, but his promotion to global head of production in 2010 was short-lived and he left to set up Comcept, his own studio, later that year.

❷ Yosuke Hayashi worked on the Xbox version of *Ninja Gaiden* in 2004 before being placed in charge of *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword* on DS; he then oversaw *Ninja Gaiden*'s arrival on PS3 for its *Sigma* remake. The success of both primed him for a promotion when Tomonobu Itagaki departed Team Ninja, and Hayashi took charge of the studio to lead development on *Metroid: Other M*, *Ninja Gaiden 3* and *Dead Or Alive 5*.

Early showings of *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* have received a cool response from *Ninja Gaiden* players – the Miss Monday trailer in particular has been criticised for its misogynistic tone – but there's no doubting the talent behind it. Comcept's **Keiji Inafune** has been in some way involved with every major Capcom game since the early '80s, from *Mega Man* and *Street Fighter* to *Dead Rising* and *Lost Planet*. **Yosuke Hayashi**, the younger of the pair, rose through Tecmo Koei after directing DS title *Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword* and the PS3 remake of *Ninja Gaiden*. Together they bring a world of experience to a title that's being handled half a world away by Spark Unlimited. We ask them about the value – and challenges – of international collaboration, and about how the expectations of core players can burden a developer's creativity.

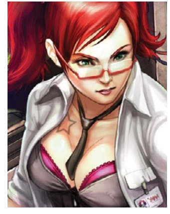
***Ninja Gaiden* has always been a serious and challenging series – games for connoisseurs of action titles. Has that limited your audience over the years?**

Yosuke Hayashi I don't think it has necessarily shrunk the audience or made it a niche. I feel with the action and fighting games Team Ninja makes, [the] difference between core players and players who are just starting in the games has become more pronounced. But I also understand that we need to make games that are more accessible to both ends of that spectrum. One of the things with *Yaiba* is that it's different and it's a new *Ninja Gaiden*, so it's a chance for us to try some new things and to think freely about those issues. Of course, we're going to make a solid, responsive game that will feel good to action fans, but it perhaps needs to be open to a different, wider audience.

Team Ninja tried a number of experiments with different styles of play in *Ninja Gaiden 3* in an attempt to broaden the audience for the game. They weren't well received by longterm series fans – at least the most vocal of them. How successful do you think they were, given what you were trying to achieve?

YH For *Ninja Gaiden 3*, we did try new things. We thought it would be important to try some different things in the numbered series. We knew that we should try to get new fans into the series who hadn't played it before, so we tried some different takes on previous *Ninja Gaiden* action. I think we were able to [earn] some new fans, and people who had never played *Ninja Gaiden* before were able to enjoy *Ninja Gaiden 3*. But at the same time, I think we were not able to give the core fans the experience they expected, and it really struck home to us what it means to be a *Ninja Gaiden* game for the core fans. Luckily, we had the chance to make *Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge* and we put those lessons into *Razor's Edge*. I think that's been widely accepted by the core fans, so I'm pretty sure they're back in the fold. We know moving forward where we need to go with the series, and what we need to keep as a *Ninja Gaiden* game. For *Yaiba*, it's a completely different game, so the challenges are in a completely different area. For us, it's a good challenge to have – to be able to think freely about all kinds of different ideas. ➋





The bra-flashing Miss Monday has so far been played entirely for crude titillation. She seems to have a supernatural patience for Yaiba's sexist tripe, a power not shared by many western viewers



"I WANT TO SEE NEW DEVELOPERS COME UP. IT'S NOT GOOD TO HAVE THE SAME GROUP OF PEOPLE MAKING GAMES"

***Ninja Gaiden Z* is a collaboration between three studios. What ideas did Team Ninja, Spark and Comcept each bring to the table, and how did the collaboration address some of the challenges you're talking about?**

Keiji Inafune Team Ninja has always made very good action games – very high quality, high playability – and we knew that [it could] make a strong title on its own. But there are also aspects of Japanese development that are weaker, and teaming up with Spark Unlimited in the United States allowed us to supplement or complement the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. Western developers and westerners in general are a little more accepting of zombies, and they have some very different ideas about what's cool and what's not; listening to those ideas and working through them has really made this a very strong title. We've had good reception so far and are looking forward to finishing it up.

What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of western and Japanese developers? What have you learnt about the east and the west?

KI One of the strong points of Japanese development is an attention to detail, and I think that comes across in [both] action games and the battle systems you see in Team Ninja titles. You see it in the quality of the responsiveness in the systems and the gameplay, and that's really something Japanese developers – and Team Ninja in particular – are very good at. They can handle action, but zombies to Japanese people in general are not something they are very familiar with, or particularly enjoy, and it's… they're kind of disgusting, not something you want to touch. And adding a humorous element to zombies? It's just completely out of the question. You wouldn't be able to think about that. We don't have the knowledge and the skills to deal with that. Given time, I'm sure you can explain things to people and they'll come to know what a zombie is and what's fun about it, but it's going to take time and effort. In order to shrink that time, to have the game come out, it's good to partner with a western studio that knows that side of things very well, and has that instinctual "this is what a zombie is, this is what's cool about zombies, and this is how we make that more fun". I think you see that in the design of the zombies that are in the game, in the look and feel of the game; that's something that would only come about through making this game with a western game development studio. It shrinks the time it takes to make the game because you're playing off each other's strengths. And while you're doing that, creating the game, it's also important that we learn, see what those strengths are and learn from each other to strengthen our own development practices and our own creativity. That collaboration is very important, and will hopefully lead to even stronger games in the future.

You run Inafune Academy, and have been involved with encouraging new talent. How important is it for you to foster new creatives, and how important was that

"[FOLLOWING NINJA GAIDEN 3], IT REALLY STRUCK HOME TO US WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A NINJA GAIDEN GAME FOR THE CORE FANS"



experience when you began collaborating with Spark?
KI It's a tough answer, and a long one, so I'll do my best. Not only do I have [the academy] but I give speeches, lectures in different places as well. I don't want to see fewer game developers in Japan; I want to see new game developers come up. It doesn't do us good to have the same group of people making games the whole time. Even though I've been in the games industry for 27 years and I'm still trying to work as a game developer myself, I do feel it's important to give back to new developers who will keep making games in the future. There's a desire to do things for myself – everybody wants to work for themselves and say, "Hey, here's this awesome game; I did that" – but there's also a certain energy that you need to give to others. And the ability to give that knowledge, to pass that on to others [is something] I get from these kinds of collaborations. It's one thing to do things myself, but it's another to tell someone the lessons I've learned and have them understand them and grow from that. In having conversations, it's not just for me but also to teach Spark a little bit about Japanese development and how things are done here, the lessons I've learned in game development. It's communicating that to Spark and having it grow as a developer. There are a lot of inconvenient things, of course, when doing these collaborations – the time difference is there, it's a ten-hour flight to Los Angeles – so there are problems that arise, but you work through them, and in doing so I learn myself. What I hope is that I can give these lessons to a younger generation so they can become even stronger creatives themselves, and I hope when they've been in the industry a while and accumulated their own experiences they can then give those experiences to the people after them. So it's the effort to give back to them, to raise them, [and] hopefully they'll raise the next generation after them – and through that good, virtuous cycle we'll have even better games and a future for game development.

Was Team Ninja able to teach any lessons of its own about the things it holds as so important?
YH The director on the Team Ninja side is looking very closely at the combat and the responsiveness of the game; something that's very important for action games – and especially for us – is to have the button input be very responsive, so the instant you push a button, something happens. That is a very important aspect for us, for action games, and the director on the Team Ninja side has worked very closely and been very critical with the action we see in *Yaiba*, giving feedback to make sure that aspect of a solid action game comes across.

It seems core *Ninja Gaiden* players would prefer something more traditional. Will they find much to love about *Yaiba*?
KI From the beginning we wanted to share the same universe as *Ninja Gaiden*, but *Yaiba* is its own thing; we don't really compare it to *Ninja Gaiden* or say we'll keep something or leave something of *Ninja Gaiden*. The battle system is completely different from *Ninja Gaiden*, and the look and feel is completely different. We don't think about comparing it to *Ninja Gaiden*. It is what it is: it's about ninjas and zombies.

With that in mind, what value does the *Ninja Gaiden* brand have to you if you're so eager to start afresh?
KI If we didn't have the *Ninja Gaiden* name in there, then of course one thing we couldn't do was have Ryu Hayabusa in the game. To have this major character as a rival to the new Yaiba character is an important part of the story, and if there was no connection to *Ninja Gaiden* then that would be thrown out the door. Without having Hayabusa in there, there would be no Yaiba. So for us to not have *Ninja Gaiden* in the title was never an option. The fact that we even get asked "what if it wasn't in the title?" is really hard to believe because it's just so core to *Yaiba*.

Spark hasn't had a breakthrough success in the west yet, either critically or commercially. What made the studio a good match for *Yaiba*?
KI At the end of the day, games are made by people. So it's really hard to judge the development staff by Metacritic scores or sales of a past game, because if you have a dedicated staff you can get a good game. There are a lot of developers in the west who have created hit titles and would say Japanese game development is weak and [they] don't want to be a part of that, even though we've made hit titles. What was important was to find a studio that was willing to learn and has staff willing to learn. Spark is willing to do that. ■

TURNING POINT

While Hayashi's *Dead Or Alive 5* was well received, *Yaiba* follows a brace of critical failures at Team Ninja. The studio's *Metroid: Other M* was deemed a mockery of *Metroid* and of Samus Aran, and *Ninja Gaiden 3* a betrayal of the series' principles. At Comcept, meanwhile, Inafune's *Soul Sacrifice* met with a lukewarm reception. The pair can take comfort in *Yaiba* developer Spark inevitably absorbing a great deal of the blame should the game fail to deliver, their past successes having earned them an enormous amount of goodwill from gaming enthusiasts and the press, but the tide is in danger of turning.


F A N T A S T I



C VOYAGE

How a four-person team from Guildford strode forth to create an entire universe



DEEP DIVE

David Ream is responsible for *No Man's Sky*'s 'gamefeel', a rather cumbersome way of describing a variety of complex systems that can determine whether a game immerses you entirely, or leaves you with a certain intangible disconnect. "The amount of time and energy we invested in [*Joe Danger*] just on 'feel' is a weird to try to explain. People don't really get [it], they just play the game and it feels kind of cool. We've all played games where you're already amazed at what you're experiencing, and yet you're stuttering along, or you're unimmersed by little niggly things. To us, it's really important that you're already enjoying moving around, and then you can explore." Murray interjects: "Someone who plays *Joe Danger* has an instant smile on their face, an instant feeling of responsiveness, of bounciness, of what I would call 'console gameplay', and that's how we want *No Man's Sky* to feel: responsive, immediate, running at 60[fps]."

From left: Sean Murray (MD, procedural programmer), Grant Duncan (artist), David Ream (gameplay programmer), Hazel McKendrick (programmer, ecosystems/creatures)



Hello Games' big reveal of *No Man's Sky* almost didn't happen. Whether you watched Spike's VGX awards show live or caught up with it after the event, the reaction to the surprise announcement was impossible to miss online. Yet had the studio's founder, **Sean Murray**, got his way, the two-minute teaser trailer that prompted such a rapturous response would never have been aired. "I showed the video to about ten people before we went live with the VGXs and eight of them told me to not show it, that it wasn't good enough and that it was a very strange game that people wouldn't understand," he says. "And I agreed with them, and I was actually trying to get them to not show the video."

In the end, an unlikely ally saved the day. "[VGX co-host] Geoff Keighley fought for us to have a place there, and really stood up for us and told us it was something we should show," Murray says. Not that he was appeased by Keighley's enthusiasm, explaining that his overwhelming emotion on the flight to the event was "complete dread". Murray was convinced that the trailer didn't look as good as he wanted it to look, and that it didn't effectively convey how the game played. Admittedly, that was partly down to the response of a handful of members of the UK press who'd seen the footage. "They met it with complete silence, and then we had to go and get [our] flight," he remembers. "We asked them what they thought and they just sat there and said, 'We're not really sure what to say.' And we said, 'Well, got to go!' We sat in silence in the taxi, in silence on an 11-hour flight, and then we got up the next morning and went to the VGX [show]. The four of us were there, and I went on."

That unveiling was a crucial turning point in a journey that began many years ago. Murray spends several minutes relaying the story in a room with his three co-workers. Enthusiastic, animated, and occasionally descending into a quiet, almost conspiratorial, whisper, he tells his tale to an audience in rapt silence. You can see how he was able to sell them on the idea.

"This is a game that's been in my head for a very long time," he says. "Not because I thought I was going to make it, but just because I thought, 'Someone is going to make this game at some point.' And my explanation coming to the guys was… I had a very strange upbringing and eccentric parents, and we moved around a lot. For a good part of my childhood, we lived in the Australian outback on a massive farm on a ranch that was a million-and-a-quarter acres, [with] seven air strips and a gold mine. And it basically meant that we were a few hundred miles from anyone else. As a kid, you would spend probably more time than most in the middle of nowhere, the *true* middle of nowhere, where if something went wrong you were told to just stay where you were and light a fire at an exact time every day, and hope that someone would find you, because you were so far from everywhere else.

"I think that a big part of that experience, when I think back, is that you get this amazing night sky. And when I say that, people picture the best night sky they've ever seen, but it feels close. I mean you can see absolutely everything – more stars than you've ever seen in your life and they're there every night. As a kid, I spent an inordinate amount of time with my Amstrad CPC, playing computer games; [I was] starting to program at that stage and looking up… I always thought that's where videogames would go, that we would create videogames that just contained the whole universe, and you'd be able to visit it all and it'd be amazing." His eyes light up at the thought. When he says *NMS* is "the game we've always wanted to make", we believe him.

That same sense of wonder, that yearning to head towards the stars rather than look up at them, is evident in the trailer. Yet it's difficult to gauge from it exactly what *No Man's Sky* is – how it's structured, how it plays, how it feels. If at times Murray seems somewhat cagey and unwilling to expand on such details, it's nothing to do with "playing a coy, clever PR game". He's adamant that he has no interest in that, and that his reticence is a case of not wanting to give too much away. "[The industry is] obsessed at the moment with parcelling everything up so you know everything about a game before it releases. And we want to allow people to make that decision on their own. When the game releases, people will put it up on the Net or whatever, but it's their choice as to whether to discover all of that themselves."

It's an ethos that extends to the game's design, too. *No Man's Sky* will not have a tutorial. It stems from a desire to show, not tell, and while Murray expresses a distaste for the '*Minecraft* in space' tag that's been attached to his game, Mojang's phenomenon has been an inspiration in one sense. "One of the nicest things that's happened over the last few years in terms of game design has been *Minecraft* not telling you the rules and formulae for crafting," he says. "That was a really bold move, and it's not something that happens very often. For me, it made the game – and when I think of *Minecraft*, that is what I think of as the game. It just wouldn't have been the same without [that]."

The *Minecraft* comparison may be inaccurate, but it's not an unreasonable one to draw, given the trailer. It soon becomes clear, however, that the cleverly edited teaser is far from the full story. "It has been really fascinating to see that people are just interested in exploring that universe, and we will probably make steps to accommodate that more," Murray says. "But we aren't making an ambient or passive experience. We will allow people who really want to have that to have that, so [the reaction] has ➊

WHEN HE SAYS NMS IS "THE GAME WE'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO MAKE", WE BELIEVE HIM



You can expect worlds alien enough to match all the unearthly colour palettes on display. As Murray explains, "We're not going to make every planet be like Earth, we're just going to tip [the scales] in our favour"

BETTER WORLDS

Murray is keen to point out that the game isn't intended as a simulation, though many of its systems have a solid basis in science: "Systems that are in our black box for determining planets and what makes them up are in many ways true for our own universe, such as the distance from the sun." This in turn will determine what's known as the 'Goldilocks zone', the region around a star within which planets can support water. Yet good gameplay will always triumph over accuracy. "There are a lot of planets [in *No Man's Sky*] that are in that Goldilocks zone, but the reality is you would travel quite a long way from here before you found something Earth-like."



shaped that side of things, but what would probably surprise people is that we are making a core gameplay experience, and that is where a quarter of our time has been focused at least."

Hello Games is aiming for a more handcrafted feel than you might expect from a game in which, as the trailer's intro text proudly states, every atom is procedural. As the studio's artist, **Grant Duncan**, explains: "The procedural [code] to us is just a tool we use to try to create this interesting world, and **Dave** [**Ream**, gameplay programmer] deals entirely with how you interact with that world to make it feel good. That, to us, is way more interesting than all the stuff that we have to go through in making this a living, breathing world. That's not the game."

"There's a misconception in terms of what people think of as procedural," Murray adds. "They're used to it meaning 'random'. They're used to the concept of [something that's] like a lottery, so one in 100 skies will be blue, one in 100 skies will be red, or whatever. And then they probably picture tools that control that, [with a] percentage chance of this or that thing happening."

Instead, the studio is building a base of layers, using simple systems that Ream affectionately calls "a magic black box of maths". Random numbers are fed in, and the box makes sense of them before spitting out something that Murray claims "feels naturalistic". There's a strict set of rules underpinning it all, in other words, and the biggest self-imposed restriction is that any new rule that is introduced to the game has to be explicable in a single sentence of plain English. Not only does this lead to a more efficient codebase, but it also allows each of the three programmers to retain all that information. For a veteran like Murray, who worked at Criterion before setting up Hello in 2009, it's one of the many benefits of working in a smaller group. "I've worked on games like *Burnout* and *Black*, where we had 100 people working on the team, and no one person even had one-tenth of that codebase in their heads. So when a bug would occur, it would actually be somebody's job to track down whose fault it was before they could fix it."

Which isn't to say that a project like this, with so many variables involved, hasn't thrown up its fair share of strange bugs and glitches. "If you introduce a new AI behaviour for creatures, then suddenly that affects fish, birds and crazy squid creatures," Murray explains. "It affects the ways fireflies work, and you find it also affects the way ships fly in space. It has this massive knock-on [effect]. If a lot of systems are sharing the same simple components, then the work that you do is kind of magnified as well. You can get yourself into horrible situations and horrible problems, but what we're trying to do is to actually simplify the process in as many ways as possible."

These problems might range from birds being found underground to the discovery of "some sort of cow animal trapped in a hole", and yet scenarios naturally occur during testing that invite the three coders to attempt to reverse engineer them – to dig into the code and to create systems "that result in those scenarios happening in an emergent way". Murray explains how he accidentally dropped a fish onto the shore of one planet and watched as birds began to flock around it. Unfortunately, the birds happened to pass over a large group of carnivorous plants, and a feathery bloodbath promptly ensued. As much as Hello Games is training its game to behave in certain ways, *No Man's Sky*'s procedural universe also teaches its coders something new every day.

It is, Murray explains, all about creating individual stories for players; stories they can share with others. In that respect, he likens it to Dean Hall's celebrated *Arma II* mod, *DayZ*. "I don't think we're similar to it, but it's a good example of a game that delivers experiences that are unique, but when you experience them, they're [also] very representative of what you might see in a zombie comic book or movie or TV show. The experience you have when you describe it out loud sounds like that kind of scenario. But it is emergent. And that's the key to what we're trying to do for science-fiction stories."

Stories won't be the only thing you'll share with other players: while *No Man's Sky* is predominantly a singleplayer game, it's a universe you won't be charting alone. You and all other players will start at its very edges, using planets as stepping stones as you steadily work your way inwards. There's a reason for heading towards the centre of the universe, although Murray isn't yet prepared to say what that might be. Again, he insists this isn't about being wilfully secretive, but about deliberately keeping players asking and wondering.

Despite an element of interaction, *No Man's Sky* is in no way a traditional multiplayer experience. "It would really hurt the [game] to have my most hated thing in the world: lobbies. And, 'Oh, come and join me on my planet – it's only 7,000 light years away,' or whatever. We didn't want to have that. But we still want people to really feel that they are playing together and that they are part of a community."

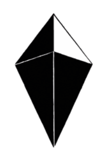
To this end, certain significant things you do in that world will be persistent across everyone's game. The first player to bring up his or her galactic map will see all the planets and the stars within *No Man's Sky*'s universe, but they will all be tagged 'unknown' or 'unexplored'. "And as you, or I, or anyone plays the game, we will discover certain things," Murray says. "[Such as] space stations, resources, creatures, or whatever those planets hold, and we can choose whether or not to upload that

"THERE'S A MISCONCEPTION IN TERMS OF WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF AS PROCEDURAL"

ARTISTIC NATURE

With procedural elements playing a part in *No Man's Sky*'s aesthetic, is there friction between the visuals Hello Games wants and its organic generation? "In the beginning, it was way more random," Murray says. "And probably the biggest turning point on the project was [learning to] rely on simple rules, like the compounds that might exist in our universe to determine the colours through [the] wavelengths of light being refracted as they pass through the atmosphere. Or what types of molecules and elements make up an actual ocean that you could swim in… It's a [narrower] range of options, but what comes from it is emergent, and not just more feasible, but prettier." Artist Grant Duncan admits that "as an artist, I hate that word [procedural]. The majority of procedural stuff looks ugly, and most artists are control freaks, so [we hate] anything that's randomly happening, even if it's based on rules, because we're used to having control over everything. In the early days, I would do a concept and block out a little scene and Sean would effectively have to reverse engineer what I did for that to happen." Soon, Duncan's observations began to inform some simple rules, which were then incorporated into the code: trees, for example, will usually be accompanied by clumps of grass and rocks.

Concept art illustrates the kind of diversity the team is shooting for – not only in landscapes, but also the ways in which you will be able to navigate these alien spaces



information. So one person on their own will not be able to make a dent in terms of exploring that universe, but hopefully millions of people playing together will be able to start mapping this [space] out in such a way as to help each other along and make new discoveries, and that's part of the excitement and the thrill of the game."

We press Murray for examples of these shared significant events, and he sighs deeply before asking himself a rhetorical question: "What am I allowed to say?" He pauses, picking his words carefully. "In every solar system there is one core thing that you can do which is of great significance to that solar system. And that is shared among everyone, and fundamentally changes that solar system, and people can choose whether or not to do that. And there are a number of mechanisms like that, which create emergent gameplay."

If *No Man's Sky*'s planets are stepping stones, then what of the leaps between them? In a universe so vast, how will Hello Games keep the journeys interesting? Murray insists that space in the game is much busier than you might think, with space stations, pirates, NPCs and more to distract you, while your ship will be powerful enough from the outset to make interstellar travel more of a short hop than a trek. "If you're on a planet and you see another on the horizon, it's not a chore to get there," Murray says, before wryly nodding to *Wind Waker*'s "hours of boat travel". Realism is a secondary concern: "I don't want a game where we are restricted by the speed of light and it takes days to travel between planets. It's a process that should be very empowering for exploration."

And yet at the same time you're vulnerable: "We want [players] to be a speck, to be infinitesimal." This is not, it seems, the time nor the place for thrilling heroics, although you will be able to assist others. How the game balances a feeling of empowerment with a sense of fragility will go a long way towards determining whether or not *No Man's Sky* succeeds.

Empowered yet vulnerable: it's a description that seems to fit Hello Games rather comfortably at the moment. Now the world knows of its plans, is the pressure beginning to tell? After all, three coders and an artist working in a modest Guildford studio have suddenly found themselves creating one of the most talked-about games in the entire industry. "I don't think we believe it," Ream says. "It's a weird thing to say, because you can look and you can see all this evidence, but there's not thousands of people just stood outside the office. That would definitely make you feel like, 'Oh my God.'"

And yet the moment he left the VGX set, leaving behind Geoff Keighley and a faintly incredulous Joel McHale ("You're just four people making this game?" may have been the Community star's most honest contribution of the night), Sean Murray found himself in a room with several other developers, including Double Fine's Tim Schafer, all congratulating him. "They were shaking my hand and patting me on the back, and then we came down and all had a hug, and it was like this big Mighty Ducks moment. Somebody shouted, 'You're trending on Twitter!' and we all said 'Yeah!', and I really don't remember much of the rest of the night." It was then that the pressure really took hold.

"I'm ten times more nervous now," Murray admits. "I feel much more comfortable being the underdog that no one expects to deliver." So if he had his time over, would he show the trailer again, or would he redouble his efforts to get it pulled from the show? "The positivity has been amazing, but all I want to do right now is to go into a very tiny room or hide under my desk with my laptop and just get back to development and really deliver."

Besides, it's the scepticism the trailer provoked that inspires Hello Games more. Although Murray dislikes the word 'ambition' ("It always sounds driven by a commercial undertone. But a drive to create is something we absolutely have"), being told theirs is too large is having a galvanising effect on the team. "Every tenth comment is, 'I don't think they can deliver on that,' or 'It's too ambitious.' And I love that," he admits. "All of us [do]."

"We've created a monster!" Ream cries in mock terror, laughing heartily. And it's clear that while Hello Games may be feeling the weight of expectation, it's also confident it can deliver on its brave, spectacular vision. The advent of a new generation of hardware has given this team the perfect opportunity to do so. "There is a feeling of elation at being this small team and having those constraints lifted from us of everything having to be hand built," Murray explains. "Now we have the power to create something huge in size and really expansive."

Clearly, there is plenty we still don't know – how *No Man's Sky* will be priced, for instance, Hello Games' release plans, how the game really plays on a moment-to-moment basis, and, perhaps more crucially still, how it *feels* to spend time in this universe. But leaving it vague is part of the plan for now.

"We said we were going to make a game about exploration," Murray says. "And I mean *true* exploration, real discovery, not just some breadcrumbs that a designer has laid down previously for you to discover. Something where even we don't know the outcomes. And no one does until they begin playing the game."

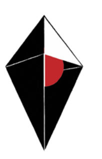
Isaac Asimov, an acknowledged influence on Murray and especially on *No Man's Sky*, would approve. After all, as the sci-fi author once concluded, "The true delight is in the finding out, rather than in the knowing." ❯

"I FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE BEING THE UNDERDOG THAT NO ONE EXPECTS TO DELIVER"



NEW WORLD ORDER

"Have we made any decisions on price? No," says Murray, although he rejects the notion of releasing *No Man's Sky* as a free-to-play title. "In many ways, it doesn't sit right with me as it exists at the moment." As for release plans, he thinks something nontraditional is in order. "Before we started out, we said to each other that we wanted to do everything differently. We wanted to choose a name that was not the norm, and didn't make for a nice hashtag. I was genuinely told that: 'You'll never trend with an apostrophe; you'll split the Twittersphere!' We want it to be different and that is born from a frustration I have with the industry conforming to the same rules all the time. I would love to explore interesting ways of releasing the game, so whether that's beta access or what, I don't know. But I'm in a strange mood at the moment where if someone says 'No one has ever done this before,' [then] we'll jump at it."



Q & A: SEAN MURRAY

FOUNDER AND MD, HELLO GAMES

Having served as the technical lead on games such as *Burnout 3* and *Black*, Sean Murray founded Hello Games in 2009, taking the title of managing director. But far from some abstracted overlord, he's directly shaping *No Man's Sky*'s worlds, building the framework that will generate the game's procedural surprises.

What does a day of procedural programming entail?
I create all the planet shapes, the terrain shapes, the rivers, the mountains, the seas, that kind of thing. Previously, I used to write an engine and then I would pass that off to Grant, and then I would write tools and [do the same]. I would have no input into the shape or the style of an environment – that would then be handed over to Grant entirely… The difference now, for instance, is the other day I was introducing the idea of a cave system, and that means actually taking the input of layers of what is [essentially] random noise and passing that through a variety of different systems that think about stuff like laws of erosion, which are the same ones we use for our mountains, and that think about actual cave structures, which is the same thing we've already done for rivers and for seas, and [it] feeds off those things. And I iterate on that, I run the game and I charge about an environment and find some caves and think, 'They look good!' Then I fly to another planet and see that they look terrible, and they've created some kind of crazy landscape. And then you fly to another and there are no caves, and then [on] another there's water in the caves, because of where the sea level is on that planet, and you dive down and find that there's actually some small bacteria-based life there, and it comes as a total surprise.

Does the topography of a planet have to be traversable by the player, or do you have areas where it's not possible to go?
When we first started working on this project, I would say that the landscapes we created looked far more alien, [and] in some ways more interesting at times. But they had terrible gameplay, and that was our first moment of, 'Oh my God, what are we doing?' And it has been one of the hardest problems on this project to make something that doesn't just look traversable, but looks interesting to traverse, that looks in many ways handmade, but can go on for miles and miles and still keep providing you with something you haven't seen before.

The game has no tutorial, and you've suggested that players will be left to their own devices. To us, that sounds like *Dark Souls*, which lets you figure out its mechanics.
Right, and that is a very good reference point for some of the things we want to do in terms of multiplayer – in terms of progression as well.

But without that kind of direct interaction?
The thing that really interests me in multiplayer is the community, the social aspect of actually playing together, of sharing an experience with a lot of people. [For example], the best time for me in an MMOG is those first few weeks, where everything is in flux and everyone is just trying to figure out the rules and the lore of the game. It's like you've landed in this universe that's just been created for you and you're all going to figure out how it works. And that is exactly what we want to create.

So if someone's coming into the game at a later time, when most things have been discovered, how do you ensure they'll have a similar experience to when the game started?
There are two things in that. The first thing is that you probably underestimate the size of the universe. If all of the people on Earth right now had very powerful spaceships and were to visit every corner of every planet in the universe, we would not do very well in our lifetime of mapping that out. The second thing is that the outer edges of the first galaxy will begin to be more explored, but as more and more players come into the game there are mechanisms we're bringing in that will keep everything in flux, and that ties in with things you can do that are of significance.

How does information sharing work?
You're all in the same universe, and when you [discover something] you can upload what you found to what is effectively a star map and an encyclopaedia of knowledge. And people would then be able to find those things much more quickly and progress forward.

Will you be able to share false information?
[Laughs] That is just the way the human mind works; it's unbelievable. And I do love that in *Dark Souls*. We're not doing that, so you can't share false information, but you could choose not to share information. And you could also choose to share information in a way that was beneficial to you…

How do you discourage malicious behaviour?
We're trying to create a set of systems that will create emergent behaviour, but we would be silly to think that some of that behaviour isn't going to be dickishness. And we would be wrong to try to curb or control that. The greatest thing about something like *DayZ* is that it creates these real stories of human nature. We similarly want to create stories that feel real, and that have an element of human nature. Having said that, I do think dickishness is a problem in *DayZ* and hurts the experience when it happens. We want cooperation to be rewarded – not by the systems we put in, but because that's what feels right for the universe. ■

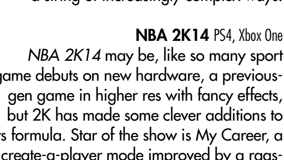
PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
360, PC, PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One
The more you play it, the more that subtitle seems prescient and carefully planned. *Assassin's Creed IV*'s world of piracy and throat stabbing is too good to become a dead end in the series' chronology. Once you've fought a Man O' War to a standstill, boarded it outnumbered and won, you want more. *Black Flag* is Ubisoft's most original IP in years, and it's already good enough to stand apart from its host series.

Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons 360, PC, PS3
The game industry hardly wants for creators who'd rather be making movies, but *Brothers* shows the reverse case can result in decent games. Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares' fairytale has drawn plaudits for its heartrending ending, but it's the design that sticks in the mind. That simple conceit – each brother controlled with an analogue stick and an action button – is put to use in a string of increasingly complex ways.



NBA 2K14 PS4, Xbox One
NBA 2K14 may be, like so many sport game debuts on new hardware, a previous-gen game in higher res with fancy effects, but 2K has made some clever additions to its formula. Star of the show is My Career, a create-a-player mode improved by a rags-to-riches story told through cheerfully cheesy cutscenes. Less pleasing, however, are its miserly upgrade economy and an always-online requirement patched in post-launch.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

Closing the genre gap

One of passion's more regrettable by-products is the urge to pigeonhole. The more invested people become in a subject, the greater the apparent need to put labels on things. Genres are helpful, admittedly, but few *Street Fighter* players would consider their skills fully transferable to *Virtua Fighter* or *Guilty Gear*. A seasoned *Total War* player is not automatically also a fan of *Europa Universalis* or *Crusader Kings II*. We call ourselves *Dark Souls* players, *StarCraft* players, or *Dota 2* players. If we don't like to class ourselves by genre, is it really fair to do it to games?

Our natural instinct to collect things and partition them by likeness hurts some games more than most. Play *Gran Turismo 6* (p88) and its lifeless AI, rudimentary damage modelling, and lack of interiors for its everyday cars seem all the more egregious by contrast with other racers. And it's true that in these areas *GT6* can't hold a candle to *Forza 5*'s Drivatars, *Need For Speed Rivals*' vehicle destruction or the texture weave on *Driveclub*'s seats.



The problem is that *Gran Turismo 6* is considered a racing game when it is a driving simulator. It is made on the principle that guiding a Peugeot 207 with perfectly modelled handling round a real-world racetrack can be every bit as thrilling as doing the same with a Bugatti Veyron. In genre terms, *Gran Turismo 6* exists in a field of one. Polyphony has opted to focus on superlative handling above all else, including the genre standards its peers continue to evolve.

By bundling things together, we create a set of genre expectations – standards by which all are judged. *The Walking Dead* (p92), which returns for a second season this month, defies classification. After all, few self-identify as fans of episodic point-and-click-adventure-cum-parenting-sims. And perhaps that's the secret of its success.

Gran Turismo 6

Booting up *Gran Turismo 6* for the first time is an uncomfortable experience. After the painfully slow day-one update download and melodramatic intro sequence, you're immediately forced to spend 17,000 credits on a Japanese hatchback that you almost certainly don't want and then thrust onto a track that, in the wake of *Forza 5*, looks decidedly underwhelming. But then you reach the first corner and Polyphony's reworked suspension physics reveals itself. No racing game has ever felt like this.

Cars lean dramatically away from apexes; wheels independently retreat into their arches when they hit rumble strips. You can feel your vehicle's weight shifting over the front wheels as you brake. Damping, anti-roll bars and centre of gravity are more than just abstract numbers being crunched behind the scenes: now you can see the effects of any adjustments. The result is transformative, bringing *GT5*'s already exceptional handling alive in a way that makes revisiting old favourites, whether it's the Integrale, NSX or Skyline, a consistent pleasure, while making every other car game – *Forza 5* included – feel flat in comparison.

GT6's handling is so good, in fact, that you won't mind being forced to start out with nothing to your name again, despite having amassed five considerable car collections over the course of the series' 16-year lifespan. But the refreshed physics model can't take all the credit for dissipating a little of that growing *Gran Turismo* fatigue; Polyphony has shaken up the game's structure, too. *GT5*'s contrived, RPG-inspired levelling system has been cast aside in favour of a more generous, and more open, setup that showers players in amusing distractions and new vehicles.

The career mode is split into six series, from Novice through to Super, and makes superb use of the generous selection of tracks as you progress. Kart, dirt and oval racing are mixed in with city and circuit events across real-world tarmac and Polyphony's own creations. The main events are bolstered by Coffee Break Challenges, Mission Races, One-Make and Special Events.

The quick-fix Coffee Break Challenges task you with such feats as knocking down as many cones as possible within a time limit, or travelling as far as you can on one litre of petrol. Mission Races ask you to overtake one or more opponents over the course of a single lap or segment of a track, while Special Events include a trip to the moon in the Lunar Rover and invites from Lord March to drive exotica at the Goodwood Festival Of Speed. One-Make trials require you to own a specific car to participate, but all of the other events provide a welcome opportunity to sample machines far beyond your financial means early on, even if driving on the Moon is somehow even less enjoyable than driving your Prius in the Hybrid Cup. Awkward filler aside, the sheer range of driving experiences on offer is dazzling.

Publisher SCE
Developer Polyphony
Format PS3
Release Out now

Reach the first corner and Polyphony's suspension physics reveals itself. No racing game has ever felt like this



Bizarrely, progression through them seems to have been inspired by *Angry Birds*, with a three-star scoring system for every career event. One is awarded for mere completion, irrespective of your final position; a second is earned with a podium finish; and the third is reserved for crossing the line first. Earning half of the available stars in a series will win you a car, with another one given when you mop up the rest, while additional events and the licence tests are opened after only ten or 20 stars (the tests are rendered even more patronising by making an appearance well after you've put a few races under your belt). The system is simple, but it works perfectly in a game whose chief pleasure is driving. Being able to progress regardless of your performance means you can focus on *GT6*'s remarkable handling model, and removes the previous games' onus on fighting your way through a lifeless grid. *Gran Turismo* is suddenly significantly less daunting, and you'll relish the prospect of almost every new race.

If only your opponents exhibited such enthusiasm. *GT6*'s AI drivers suffer from the series' perennial lack of personality, looping the circuits in a predictable line and functioning more like mobile chicanes than competition. Occasionally, a puff of dust will erupt ahead of you as one puts a wheel in the dirt, but they'll never do anything as dramatic as spin out, fight over a corner or roll over. Even so, they remain hypnotic to watch thanks to that spectacular physics model, functioning as a shop window for purchases as you imagine how their vehicles corner, accelerate and brake.

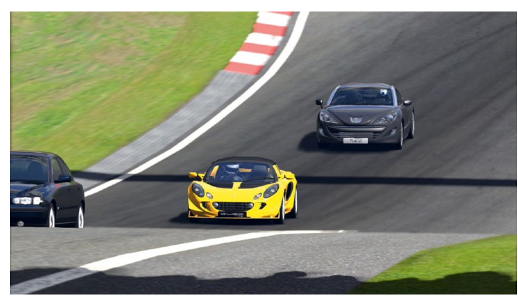
Unfortunately, knowledge of a particular model's handling won't help you to predict the best moment to overtake. While cars might look like they're governed by the same rules as you at first, proceedings are really controlled by conspicuous rubberbanding. Front runners zip off during the first lap only to be found crawling around the third, diminishing any sense that your driving abilities are what determine your finishing position, not just your lap time. As ever, you can simply buy your way to success, too, by ensuring your car is as close to the top of each PP (Performance Points) band – which group together modified and clean cars with similar power outputs – as possible.

Except now you can invest real money into that endeavour. Coming so soon after *Forza 5*, the very existence of *GT6*'s microtransactions caused a stir, but Polyphony lives up to its promise that they provide an entirely optional route for cash-rich, time-poor players. *GT6* is much less of a grind than *GT5*, and you'll find yourself earning credits and prize cars quickly. The most exotic machinery still requires concerted saving, but you'll spend a great deal less time feeling neutered along the way. And that wait is further mitigated by Vision GT, a collaboration between Polyphony and the



TOP Cars may look wonderful and move realistically, but they still sound like lawnmowers. Every car has its own engine note, but weak bass ruins the effect. Polyphony promises to patch in better recordings further down the line. LEFT In-car view remains the choice for players who want to enjoy the full driving simulation, enlivened by the bounce and shudder of *GT6*'s suspension. But choosing this view in a standard model still results in only a silhouette of the interior

BELOW *GT6*'s premium cars never look anything less than fantastic, especially when you catch them in the right light. But if you thought *Forza 5*'s fidelity only offered diminishing returns, you'll be in for a shock when comparing the two



ABOVE While you can't alter your livery, there's still reasonable scope for customisation, both visually and mechanically. Bodykits, wheels and height adjustments can make your stock model look significantly more aggressive



world's biggest car manufacturers – and even, oddly, the likes of Nike – that further broadens *GT6*'s vast vehicle list with a number of exclusive concept cars. These will be made available over time, but the first, Mercedes-Benz's AMG Vision GT, is available right now for free.

Racing is much improved when you replace the lacklustre AI with human opponents, and while the twoplayer splitscreen mode is disappointingly limited, *GT6*'s online functionality has benefited from the fan feedback on *GT5*. Joining or creating a race room is simple and quick, and setting up a race or championship with whichever restrictions you want to put in place is much easier than before. Until the host begins an event, participants can spend the time getting to know the course and tuning up their car in an open practice session. If a race is already in progress, you can watch it till you're able to join the session. Despite restrictions, it's still possible to find yourself in a room up against much more powerful vehicles, and it is perhaps in this respect that the game's microtransactions will prove irksome for those who prefer to earn their fleet.

Balancing concerns aside, it's cheering to see that the online mode maintains the singleplayer game's 60fps and native 1080p resolution. While it's tough not to be disappointed by *GT6*'s graphics when compared to *Forza*'s blistering visuals, Polyphony has squeezed remarkable performance from PS3. It's not a consistent one – the framerate drops during very busy moments, and the quality of trackside scenery charts the evolution of PS3 graphics – but the overall view is rarely less than pleasant. There's still a noticeable divide between the premium and standard car models, the latter continuing to lack interiors, but there are far more premium cars



BUGGY DESIGN

The inclusion of Moon-based courses was inspired by the team's work to accurately render the stars for the game's day/night cycle, and probably seemed like a good idea when it was pitched. However, driving an underpowered electric vehicle in less than 20 per cent of the Earth's gravity turns out to be an atrocious experience, despite the inherent charm of being able to trace two of the actual routes taken by Apollo crews. The Lunar Roving Vehicle (LRV) is slow and awkward to steer, yet will flip onto its roof – or somersault into the air – in response to even small rocks. Its inclusion is symptomatic of Polyphony's approach to the series, which regularly sees the studio value accuracy and comprehensiveness over fun.

While some PS3 games offer DualShock 4 support, *GT6* isn't one of them. PS3's ageing controller doesn't prove detrimental, but it is unappealing after time with a PS4, and we'd still recommend playing with a wheel

this time around. *GT6* looks its best during replays, where the game pulls the series' trick of smothering everything in an additional layer of postprocessing, but it also serves as a reminder of all the compromises that may not have been necessary on eighth-gen hardware.

For instance, the loading times, which often keep you waiting the best part of a minute for your next race. They're even more galling given the effort that has gone into streamlining the career mode, and sorely hurt the game's pace. There are other missteps, too, such as the absence of any option to go straight to the next event (outside of championships) from the race screen. Even the Goodwood events, which take place on the same course, require you to return to a menu to select the next challenge. For all *GT6*'s improvements, Polyphony remains out of touch with many genre innovations.

GT6 finds itself in an awkward middle ground, both of generation and genre. Polyphony has produced a handling and physics model that is unmatched by any other racer, but failed to provide AI competition capable of showcasing it to its fullest. Playing against friends reveals a peerless driving simulation, but you'll need to work your way through the singleplayer in order to get the most out of the game online. The alternative is microtransactions – a galling thought after all the hours ploughed into the first five games. *GT6* feels like an almighty tech demo for a game yet to emerge from its fastidious science, one we've been waiting to play since 1997. Perhaps *GT7*, apparently due next year, will be that game. For now, we're left with a driving sim that's as close to real as any game has ever come.

7

Post Script

Why do developers keep slapping L-plates on experienced drivers?

Gran Turismo 6 wants to get you behind a wheel as quickly as possible. Once you've placed the disc in your PS3's drive, all that stands between you and the open road is an intro and the name-entry fields. After this, you'll find yourself parked in the pits at Brands Hatch, sitting in a Clio RS '11. It's an efficient opening, undoubtedly, and you'll initially feel grateful to Polyphony for sparing you the ordeal of navigating another of its outdated UI designs before you've had a chance to sample the new driving physics.

Heartened, you squeeze the right trigger and wait for the revs to spike. Nothing happens. You try again, but the 2.0L in-line four remains stubbornly unmoved. It's X you should be pressing. Despite Polyphony's keenness to be on trend with *Gran Turismo 6*'s menu-less startup, the studio apparently remains entirely unaware of many of the other genre innovations that have become standardised since 1997.

Having located the archaic accelerator, it's at least now possible to get out on the tarmac. But even after undoing a decade's worth of conditioning and forcing yourself to ignore the triggers, the experience is still a neutered one. All of the driving aids are switched on and your hot hatch is inexplicably lumbered with an automatic gearbox.

Despite Polyphony's admirable sentiment, you're now forced to spend a lap wishing it would end so that you can remap the controls to something more befitting of the 21st century and switch off all those patronising driving aids. Much of this could have been avoided by simply asking players if they are new to *Gran Turismo* – or even driving games – before the game starts, then automatically customising the default settings to suit.

At least Polyphony has the decency to let you skip its intro. Turn 10's *Forza 5* forces players to sit through a Jeremy Clarkson monologue before sending you to Prague in what is presumably a customised McLaren P1, perhaps fitted with its automatic gearbox by the same aftermarket specialists that sorted out your Clio RS. After completing a dull lap, you're handed back to the Top Gear man for more unskippable histrionics and it is only then that the option to open up *Forza*'s full driving model – and disappointingly scant track selection – becomes available to you.

Both series are long-running and supported by extremely passionate fanbases – two groups with more than a little overlap. So why do Polyphony and Turn 10 consistently fail to recognise that loyalty? Early on in these series' lives, going through the motions of tutorial races and licence tests was no less enjoyable than the first time you sat through them. But decades on, it's increasingly galling to be treated like a beginner with each new iteration. Equally frustrating is having all of your progress stripped from you and being reset to the point where you're unable to afford anything more than a humble family saloon.

> It's inexcusable that players who put hundreds of hours into GT5 should find their efforts entirely unrewarded on booting up GT6



The counter-argument is that these games need a sense of progression, and that subtle changes in a new handling model are often revealed by a lap or two in a slower vehicle. And in the latter regard, *Gran Turismo 6*'s suspension is particularly noticeable in the spongier, less sport-oriented stock. But giving players a broad range of driving experiences could be achieved through event structuring alone, without forcing us to buy our way back up to a Pagani. Cross-generational difficulties aside, it's inexcusable that players who put hundreds of hours into *GT5* should find their efforts entirely unrewarded on booting up *GT6*.

Gran Turismo highlights this more than most. Given that the series has never really succeeded in providing a satisfying racing experience, its focus remains on the simple pleasure of driving. Why isn't the chance to try out your existing collection in sharper form considered adequate motivation to invest in another instalment?

The looming shadow of microtransactions means the conventional structure is unlikely to go away any time soon. Polyphony has pitched its payments as a way for busy players (or impatient ones) to progress through the game more quickly. And to the studio's credit, such investments are kept out of sight of the main game and new cars are handed out generously. Turn 10 was more bullish, its cars dauntingly expensive at first. No wonder the studio hastily discounted its prices soon after the game's release.

Gran Turismo 6 adjusted its economy post-launch, too, but had less ground to make up. Even so, what motivation does any studio have to innovate the oft-repeated structure of racing games when the promise of throttling back players to yield more money clouds design meetings? *Forza 5* illustrated the dangers of misjudging your audience, and studios' desire for us to acclimatise to this new payment model will likely draw yet more attention away from the loyal players who come back for each subsequent release.

It's understandable that developers should want to cater to new players as well as old, but few have found a satisfying middle ground – in any genre, let alone racing – that doesn't force experienced players through unnecessary reiteration of well-honed skills. It's an issue of customisability, which is traditionally considered an area of strength in driving games. But the continued insistence to lock advanced options behind an unskippable prologue for the sake of accessibility, and to throw the dust sheets back over loyal players' car collections, is proving deleterious to the genre. ■

The Walking Dead: All That Remains

The cast of The Walking Dead's TV incarnation may have spent most of the second season hunkered down on Hershel's farm doing little more than falling in and out of favour with each other, but Telltale takes no time at all to reassure you that it has no intention of its story following suit. *All That Remains*, the first instalment of this episodic adventure's long-awaited *Season Two*, is barely five minutes old before Telltale punches you in the gut. It'll find room to do it another couple of times during this opener's two-hour runtime, too. Nothing has changed.

And yet everything has changed, because (spoiler alert) Lee's gone. The lens through which we played *Season One*, which cemented Telltale as one of modern gaming's finest storytellers, succumbed to the zombie virus in the final episode, leaving his adopted charge on her own. *Season Two* opens with confirmation of the first run's climactic tease: Clementine's now under the care of Christa and Omid, the bit-part couple expecting their first child. Within minutes they're pushed apart, and Clem finds herself back where she started: alone in a world devastated not just by a zombie apocalypse, but also by the effects of terror on everyday people. Yet while Lee's absence is felt keenly – any game would suffer for the loss of such a finely crafted relationship – at least *we're* still here. Now, instead of giving Clem guidance through Lee, we're doing it directly.

Clem's a little older now, but still sporting that baseball cap, still keeping that hair short. She's still lugging that backpack, too, and an early rummage through its contents unearths a torn picture of her departed surrogate father, as well as a crude sketch of Kenny and family, both of which we're given the option to burn in the hope of keeping a fire going. We refuse, naturally. Lee may be gone, but our desire to keep Clem safe from harm – physical and mental – endures.

Mechanically, little has changed: this is the same blend of point-and-click exploration, dialogue choices and fraught, QTE-packed set-pieces, although the button prompts have been redesigned in line with the new house style Telltale laid down in *The Wolf Among Us*. Yet this framework is given fresh context by the person you guide through it. Where Lee's gait was cautious yet confident, the walk of a man afraid of what was round the corner but sure he could overcome it, the mere sight of Clem in motion sets the teeth on edge. She creeps gingerly through a forest, jumping out of her skin when a couple of crows fly out of a nearby bush. She tiptoes, terrified, around the outside of a house she knows holds much-needed medical supplies. And when she comes to a high ledge, it takes her a couple of tries before she can jump high enough to reach it. It's a smart way of making you feel vulnerable, reinforced by subtle cinematic framing – a long shot of her alone in the forest; a close-up of her panic-stricken face.

Publisher Telltale Games
Developer In-house
Format 360, iOS, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Maintaining Clementine's vulnerability over the next five episodes might just be the toughest challenge



The combat, however, presents a concern. Lee's battles were clumsy and improvisational, and Clem was clearly paying attention. She knows that, in a pinch, she must look off to the side, because there's normally a brick or a rake with which to keep an undead aggressor at bay. She's learned, too, that you keep swinging a claw hammer until the groaning stops. Yet it's hard not to think of Square Enix's *Tomb Raider* reboot, where the scared, fragile character of the opening moments became an unstoppable killing machine by the game's end – and, worse, a willing one. Maintaining Clem's vulnerability over the course of the next five episodes might just be the toughest challenge Telltale faces.

The studio's best chance of overcoming that obstacle is its choice system. Throughout *All That Remains'* two-hour runtime, you'll have ample opportunity to shape Clem's character. Our Clem was by turns snarky, sincere and outright hostile to those she met, but if you want her to be relentlessly unpleasant, a girl embittered by heartbreak and loss, you can make her so.

Before they're separated, Clem tells Christa they need to find a group, and you suspect that's as much about the needs of Telltale's writing staff as it is about safety in numbers. Clem discovers one soon enough, hunkered down in a house in the middle of the forest, and they're naturally suspicious. Partially, of how a girl made it so far on her own – several of them speak of an antagonist named Carver as if he's Lord Voldemort himself, suspecting Clem of working for him – but mostly of the bite on her arm, her claims that it wasn't the work of a walker falling on deaf ears. They come round eventually. Most of them, anyway.

It's early days for this group, of course, but we've already got our Kenny. You'll think it's Nick at first: with his mullet and baseball cap, he's a dead ringer for *Season One*'s bête noire when viewed from behind, and his first appearance sees him loose off a shotgun blast inches from Clem's midriff. Yet this is another Telltale red herring. The true villain of the piece is Rebecca, a sour-faced, heavily pregnant woman who's hostile from the off. By the episode's end, you'll have some dirt on her, and it's sure to come in handy.

All That Remains, like *Season One* opening salvo *A New Day*, does a fine job of setting the scene while providing enough action and story beats to ensure it feels like more than a teaser trailer to drive sales of the season pass. Yet at two hours, it's short even by Telltale's standards, and its climax is disappointingly abrupt, fading to black with a setpiece in full flow. Cliffhanger endings are fine when the next episode of a TV show is days away, but less so when the wait is likely to last a couple of months. Yet Telltale has already achieved something remarkable, proving – to both Clem and to you – that there's life after Lee.

7

RIGHT Clem's visibly older than she was at the end of the first season, taller and thinner in the face. But the most obvious sign of change comes as soon as you lay eyes on the gun clasped in her hands







ABOVE Telltale's gone to great lengths to ensure you feel like you're in control of someone small. The camera is closer to the ground now, and zombie threats often emerge from the top of the screen. **LEFT** Combat is the usual mix of hammering buttons on command and clicking on zombie craniums to swing whatever improvised melee weapon is in your hand. Telltale being Telltale, we lost a few fights when prompts failed to appear

BELOW While most of the first season was spent in Georgia, *All That Remains* is set out in the sticks. The sticky southern summer is a distant memory, though – your first task is to keep a fire alive



Telltale's writing still carries plenty of emotional weight, but we need to feel like our choices really shape *Season Two*

Post Script

With four games on the go, Telltale's formula risks being stretched too thin

We're worried about Telltale. This is a studio that pledged a new episode of *The Walking Dead*'s first season would be released every month. That eventually slipped to every couple of months, with presumed certification hiccoughs often keeping PS3 owners waiting a little longer. Players on all platforms fell foul of bugs, the most severe of which deleted their save files – hardly ideal in a game so heavily focused on choice and consequence.

The Walking Dead's stunning success meant most forgave Telltale its trespasses, even giving it the status of the go-to studio for other forms of storytelling media looking for a videogame adaptation. First came *The Wolf Among Us*, based on the Fables comic series. VGX brought announcements of two more projects: one based on *Borderlands*, the other on HBO's Game Of Thrones TV series. While Telltale has doubtless used *The Walking Dead*'s sales success to significantly expand, the concern that its resources are being stretched too thin already have some weight. We were told new episodes of *The Wolf Among Us* would be released every one to two months. The first debuted in mid-October; the second has slipped to 2014.

Yet it is not simply in terms of resources that Telltale risks pushing itself too far. Its gameplay template – exploration and discovery, choice and consequence, life and death – will now be used to power not one, but four games. And a playthrough of *All That Remains* raises concerns that this powerful formula is already losing a little of its magic.

In fact, the shine came off for us before that. For all the tear-jerking power of *Season One*'s climax, its close brought with it confirmation that many choices had little to no effect on events. The big narrative decisions all led somewhere, of course, but many of the incidental screen-corner warnings that a fellow survivor would remember what we'd just said after a dialogue choice turned out to be of little consequence.

A replay of *Season One* further highlights the use of smoke and mirrors. The opening episode, *A New Day*, featured the first instance of one of Telltale's favourite tricks: forcing the player to save one character from death and leave the other to fend for themselves. In this case, it was a choice between Duck or Shawn, though there was no choice to be had. Save Duck and Shawn gets bitten; save Shawn and he gets bitten anyway, with Duck surviving. And as the season progressed, leaving Telltale to write around a branching series of choices – by the start of the final episode, there were 32 potential decision paths for the writing staff to contend with – even real choices were quickly rendered moot. Save the gormless, cowardly Ben in the fourth episode and he'll be killed early in the fifth. Why should we feel any attachment to the new group Clem meets in *Season Two* when the first series taught us that they'll all end up dead or despicable?

We weren't to know any of this at the time, and an implied consequence can be every bit as powerful as a real one during your first playthrough. Yet the reappearance of Telltale's formula in *All That Remains* invites suspicion or, at worst, apathy.

The seams haven't burst; they're just a little more visible now. *The Walking Dead*'s first season succeeded because of the apparent weight of its decisions and its well-realised central relationship between Clem and Lee. With the former's impact watered down through familiarity and the latter gone entirely, Telltale has far more to prove in the game's second run than simply showing that Clementine is capable of standing on her own two feet. It needs to show that our choices still matter, that our dialogue decisions have real weight, and that this undoubtedly powerful formula can withstand being stretched across not just a difficult second season, but three other series, too. ■

Warframe

Since its arrival on PS4's launch day, Digital Extremes' thirdperson co-op shooter has already enjoyed numerous updates, including one radical overhaul of the way that damage works in the game. Such is the way of free-to-play gaming: frequent iteration is key to attracting and sustaining a healthy playerbase. *Warframe*'s moment-to-moment play is improving in both feel and the potential for tactical expression as the game heads towards a sturdy consistency, even as the procedurally generated levels in which it's set will forever shift.

The game is based within our own familiar solar system, its missions chosen from an interplanetary map. Levels are linked together in a spider's web and clustered around each planet that circles the sun. The story concerns the Tenno, a race on the brink of extinction, and their would-be slave masters, the Grineer. The Tenno are clad in titular Warframes, ancient performance-enhancing exoskeletal technology that only they have the capacity to operate. Many suits lie dormant across the stars, where they must be found or, naturally, purchased with a credit card by those who lack time, patience or treasure-hunting spirit.

Different Warframes suit different styles of play. The Banshee suit, for example, with its sonic attacks and acoustic target detection, favours a stealthy approach, while Saryn's venomous assaults make it effective against organic enemies, plus it can 'shed' its skin to create a decoy. As you quest through the game's stages with up to three online players, your chosen Warframe class gains experience points, increasing in power and upgrade capacity over time. Likewise, your weapons – two for shooting, one for melee – level up with you, and much of the appeal here comes from the combination of *Diablo*-style loot drops (better weapons, suits or the materials to craft them) and the long, winding road to showboating power over your peers.

As convention dictates, *Warframe* employs two forms of virtual currency. Credits can be collected during missions from downed enemies, while Platinum must be purchased with your own money once your small starting pot is spent, costing about 4p per unit. New suits can be bought outright with Platinum, or their blueprints purchased with Credits, the latter requiring a subsequent scour of the universe for the components to craft the suit by hand. Since many of the parts are hard to come by, all but those with the most time to invest will be tempted to pay up for new Warframes (at an average cost of around £10 per suit), or just opt to level up their starting equipment.

Gear up and then you and three automatically matched players will streak through *Halo*-esque space stations – all banks of blinking monitors and greenish, dingy caverns – as you battle the Grineer AI. Missions range from straightforward A to B runs to Horde-like fights in which you must protect resources from waves of attackers. Intermittent boss battles provide the best firefights, your opponent's suite of special attacks forcing more considered strategies from your squad.

Publisher Digital Extremes
Developer In-house
Format PC, PS4 (version tested)
Release Out now

In the absence of a lock-on, close-quarters fights lack elegance as you flail while struggling with the camera



Gunplay feels light and insubstantial, with the emphasis on *Unreal*-style running and gunning at top speed, each player racing for the next pickup, softening enemies with bullets while sprinting towards them for the melee finish. In the absence of a lock-on, close-quarters fights lack elegance as you flail while struggling to adjust the camera. There's scant refinement to the combat, something that rudimentary puzzles do little to make up for, but at least the most recent update means the game distinguishes between damage types, with greater nuance between weapon and enemy variations.

Your warrior employs a kind of parkour-lite when navigating space's halls and corridors: you can vault ledges, dash and tumble across small gaps, and wall run. With the right mod, you can even launch into jumps that carry you into the rafters. These moves can be mixed with attacks, so you can slide along the ground on your knees in a nod to *Vanquish* before tumbling into a katana swipe. But despite the acrobatic animations, the Tenno exhibit none of the fluidity and sticky movement we've come to expect from digital parkour.

Mods are the most welcome drops from enemies, presented in the form of collectible cards that can be installed into your weapons and armour to imbue them with various buffs and upgrades. Each, however, has an install cost. Guns and swords have a limit to the cumulative cost of these mods, introducing a certain tactical element as you decide whether to use up their capacity on, for example, more ammo or better accuracy. Weapons can be upgraded with Orokin Reactors, which increase the number of mods that can be installed, giving a welcome layer of customisation and a much-needed alternative to the monetised upgrade path.

With scores of missions spread across the galaxy's various nodes, you may be waiting for some time for a match in some of the more remote areas of space – unless, of course, you have three friends of a similar level with whom to travel the galaxy. The game will allow you to commence missions with only two players in the party (adding new Tenno into the mix as they come online) and, usefully, it's possible to see at a glance how many players are currently playing any mission, helping you speedily find a game.

It is, however, difficult to shrug off the sense of futility underpinning the broader experience. This is a game about levelling up characters and equipment, but the ways in which this power can be demonstrated are disappointingly one-note. Strip out the poor parkour and clunky melee and all you're left with is a shooter, and a workmanlike one at that.

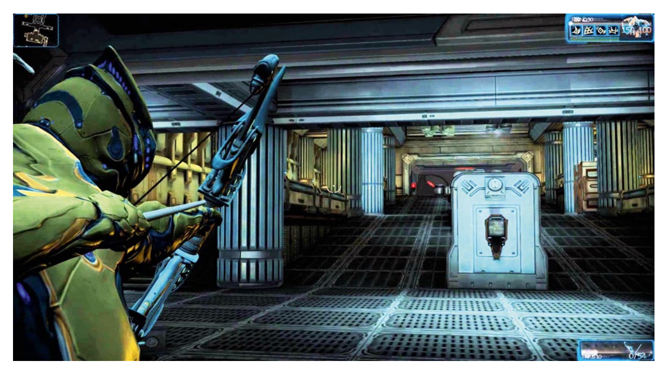
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LEFT Aside from the memorable boss battles, the AI is rudimentary; the challenge comes from enemies arriving in ever-greater numbers, rather than their sheer intelligence. BELOW As you level up weapons and armour, you increase their power and unlock new mod slots, making the decision to switch to a new, base-level weapon trickier. BOTTOM Hold down the melee button and you'll execute a useful heavy strike, although this is vulnerable to interruption by an enemy attack as it winds up



ABOVE Later on in the game, you gain access to Sentinels. These are companion drones that can be programmed to fulfil an attack or support role, and can benefit not only an individual player but their team as well





Peggle 2

Publisher EA
Developer PopCap
Format Xbox One
Release Out now

This is *Peggle* all right: a stock of ten balls, a screen full of pegs to hit them with, and an immaculate physics model. While the initial reaction may be one of vague disappointment, it gives way to relief the minute you first fail a stage. In the years since PopCap's riff on pachinko first appeared, much has changed in the game industry, and this is a formula ripe for the monetising. Yet when we run out of balls with a handful of orange pegs still onscreen, we're not asked if we'd like to cough up 69p for a few more goes. There are no purchasable boosters to clear the bits of the screen that we hadn't managed to get ourselves. Although we suspect the delay from its Xbox One launch-day release was to help *Peggle 2* not choke under a cloud of petrol fumes and zombie viscera, it does stand out from the launch-window crowd. And not just in style and tone, but also because it's that rarest of beasts: an Xbox One game not infested with microtransactions.

Perhaps that will come. A main menu icon has a picture of a shopping cart and bears the ominous legend 'Coming soon'. But given what *Peggle 2* has shipped with, it seems most likely that PopCap's DLC plan will focus on Masters. Just five are available now, and only Bjorn, the dopey unicorn that's the closest thing *Peggle* has to a protagonist, will be familiar to fans of the first game. The Master selection screen – all five in a row, with the space below occupied only by a single icon that randomly selects one – suggests more will follow.

The other Masters are obviously PopCap creations from the second you lay eyes on them. There's Jeffrey, a troll glugging from a keg whose eyes are permanently closed and who offers up Big Lebowski quotes by way of encouragement. There's Berg, a yeti who turns his back to you and dances when you clear a stage, with his bare arse pixellated for modesty. Gnorman is a robotic gnome whose Gneighbourhood (PopCap's word, not ours) is a cutesy steampunk village; Luna, a ghostly pigtailed skeleton, offers up wry existentialist thoughts.

These aren't just additions to PopCap's swollen book of excellent character design. Each has a special power, accessed via one of the two randomly placed green pegs in each level. Bjorn's Super Guide, which shows you the trajectory a ball will take after it hits its first peg, gives a welcome leg up to newcomers, but even old hands will benefit from the gleaming trail when they've lined up a shot that will take out a sweeping arc or loop-the-loop of pegs. Jeffrey's Bowlder tumbles downwards after the first peg you knock, destroying all in its path. Berg's Deep Freeze locks moving pegs in place, and pegs your ball connects with will slide across the icy plane created by his frosty breath, taking out obstructions along the way. Gnorman's Uber Volt, meanwhile, clears out the two nearest blocks to the one your ball lands on. Luna's Nightshade takes some getting used to – it renders blues translucent, letting you aim straight for hard-to-reach oranges. She will be the leaderboard-focused player's Master of choice; you still get points for every blue peg your ball passes through, and they all respawn next turn.

Each Master hosts a world comprised of ten stages – making for a comparable offering to the original's 55 – plus there's a sixth world in which you get to take your pick. Each world also contains a set of ten Trials, and these are more specific and skill-based than the regular stages, where success so often comes more by luck than judgement. Some Trials task you with pulling off extravagant skill shots, such as using Gnorman's Uber Volt to hit ten separate pegs – a move marvellously dubbed as Major Discharge. Others ask that you clear a level of pegs with a single ball. You might need to finish the level with a high score or, more onerously, a low one. Some give you infinite use of a Master's superpower, or maybe none at all. They're a delightful change of pace: you know there's a solution, that what it tells you to do is possible, and as such they require a lot more thought than the fire-and-forget nature of traditional *Peggle*.

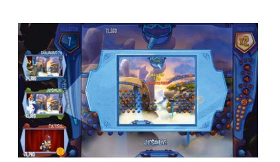
Clear out a level and the resulting Ultra Extreme Fever is a bigger festival of light and colour than ever

There's an element of skill involved at all times, of course, though it rarely extends beyond the trajectory of a ball's first bounce. Thereafter, you're in the hands of the *Peggle* gods. While it's tempting to take the credit for a shot that cleared half the screen, scored 100,000 points and bounced off the lip of the bucket that patrols the bottom of the screen, off a wall and back in for a free ball, you know you had little to do with it.

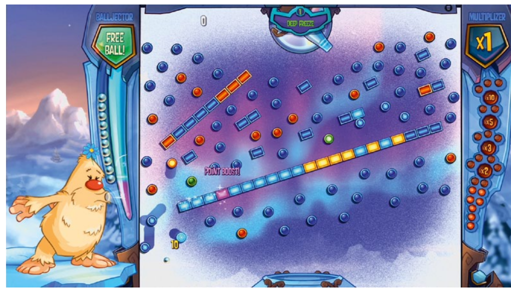
But *Peggle*'s secret is the way it makes you feel about these successes – and it's here that this most feels like a true sequel. Clear out a level and the resulting Ultra Extreme Fever is a bigger festival of light and colour than ever, and Xbox One's Game DVR popup serves as an extra pat on the back. The accompanying crescendo is no longer limited to Ode To Joy either – each Master has their own piece of classical music. Meters fill and refill with cascades of colour. Bonuses send your score rocketing while the William Tell Overture builds to a thrilling climax. It's like winning a fruit machine jackpot on stage at the Last Night Of The Proms.

In the first game, this dopamine rush helped you overlook the rather obvious role played by lady luck. Here, its remit has expanded, also helping you get over that spartan Master select screen, ensuring you forgive the rather sparse single-mode multiplayer component, and making you forget that the new Masters' powers have a whiff of gimmickry about them. *Peggle 2*, then, is still *Peggle*, but there's little to justify the seven-year wait or its spot in Xbox One's launch window. And while it may not ask you to shell out 69p for turns, it's seemingly only a matter of time before you're invited to pay for modes and Masters that in the past would have been part of the package from day one.

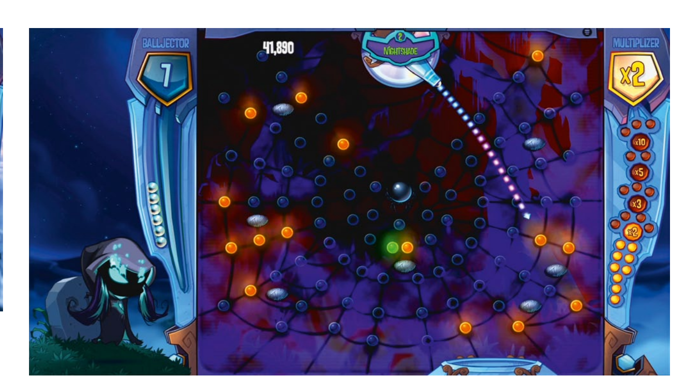
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GOT YOU PEGGED
Peggle 2's multiplayer is as resistant to change as its main game: currently, the only mode available is Peg Party, as seen in the original's 360 version. Up to four players play on the same board, and by holding Y you can scroll through a list of windows to view moves in realtime. There are no free balls on offer, and you're best off building up your multiplier for a few turns before activating your Master's special move. It's the same as ever, then, but there's one next-gen feature: you can carry on playing singleplayer while Xbox One searches for a match in the background.



ABOVE Berg's Deep Freeze power is lost on levels like this – it only affects pegs, with bricks unmoved by his frosty breath. Once you finish a world, you can revisit it with the Master of your choice in search of higher scores







TOP Of all the Master powers, Luna's Nightshade will take the most getting used to. It's not easy rewiring your brain to accept that your ball will sail straight through those inky-blue peg outlines. ABOVE A successful turn is met with a screen full of text popups. Almost everything you do is rewarded, a process PopCap cribbed from *Burnout 3*. It's still a powerful one all these years later. LEFT Each set of Trials opens with a couple of gentle tasks that are more tutorial than challenge. Here, you learn how to chain together Extreme Slides using Bjorn's Super Guide; later, you'll have to repeat the trick without the power

The Novelist

Publisher Orthagonal Games
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

The Kaplans are miserable. Dan, an author of modest repute, is struggling badly with his new novel. His wife Linda is a frustrated painter, and their marriage is on the rocks. To top it off, his son Timmy is being bullied and having a rough time in school. Hoping that a change of scenery will help, they move to a remote hilltop house that's a steal for the price – for very good reason: the Kaplans quickly start to suspect they're not alone. They're right. Which, naturally, is where you come in.

They've got good reason to be scared. If you can see them, you can read their thoughts; sneak up behind them and you can access their memories. Yet while *The Novelist* is at heart a point-and-click adventure played from a firstperson perspective, a layer of gentle stealth gives it enough mechanical complexity to make it feel like more than just an interactive novel. You can possess light fixtures, flitting unseen from one to another, jumping back down to terra firma to read journals and private correspondence. You can make a possessed light source flicker, luring whoever's in the room to it so you can reach an object of interest. Get it wrong and they'll notice you and give chase: the screen fades to white and you can't hide in the wiring until you break line of sight with your pursuer. Get spotted once and they'll become suspicious; mess up again and you're done with that family member until the next chapter.

In fact, the Kaplans, and the scores of owners and tenants who've gone before them, had little cause for concern. You're a benign presence, interested only in your housemates' needs and wants and how they might be met. Each of *The Novelist*'s chapters begins with a basic narrative outline: news of a busy weekend, for instance, with a writer friend of Dan's, Linda's parents, and one of Tommy's few friends all wanting to come and stay. From there you move around the house reading the Kaplans' thoughts, memories, diary entries and letters to friends back home, and discover what each of them wants from the situation. Those desires take the form of objects dotted around the house. If Dan needs to focus on his work, it'll be his typewriter or office door; for Tommy it might be a kite to be flown at the beach, or a bundle of sheets for building a fort in the living room. You make your choice, then you skulk about the house after dark – this time reading much older journal entries that fill out the history of the house – and whisper your decision to Dan as he sleeps.

This is where things get tricky. We expect games to reward successful play, but here every victory is followed by a crushing defeat. You can only choose one family member's desired outcome: if you've identified what another one wants, you can select it during your night-time wander and half-meet their needs with a compromise, but it's never going to entirely satisfy them. And it means, of course, that someone is always going to be disappointed, feeling unwanted, unloved, their anxiety deepening still further. Each chapter ends with three static scenes with captions that lay out the consequences of your decision, always in the same order: good news, OK news, then – bang – heartbreak. You'll resolve to make amends in the next chapter, but a fresh set of circumstances almost immediately moves the goalposts and, with them, your priorities.

There is never a right decision. The game's title dictates that your early loyalty will be to Dan – the family's escape is initially pitched to you as a way for him to finish his novel free of distractions – but that soon changes. Linda, too, is a frustrated creative, but she has much more on her plate than her single-minded husband. She frets endlessly in letters home about the state of their marriage. She worries about her husband's drinking, her son's schooling, and how her devotion to both of them has seen her put her career to one side. Her needs are, for the most part, simple – a bottle of wine on the couch with her husband, a weekend camping with the family – but that also makes them dangerously easy to ignore.

It is a game of endless compromise, and in that sense it is a remarkable simulation of family life

Then there's Timmy. With no sibling to play with, he's left to his own devices. Where his parents relay their emotions in their letters and diary entries, he puts crayon to paper and tells his story through drawings. Pay attention to his needs and he'll sketch happy scenes – flinging a frisbee at a playmate in one, playing boardgames with his dad in another – but neglect him and he paints a different picture. A pair of bigger boys point and laugh at him outside school. He stands helplessly by as his father slumps, head in hands, over his typewriter. When news arrives of his falling behind in reading comprehension, his frustration is made clear in a sketch of a blue book which he covers in furious red scribbles. When you choose to let him down, you'll wish you could explain – that if he'd flown his kite his parents would have inched closer to divorce, that if he'd had a friend to stay his father risked losing his publishing deal – but that's never an option, neither for your mute, ghostly presence nor for his troubled parents.



The Novelist, then, is a game of endless compromise, and in that sense it is a quite remarkable simulation of family life. You work through it the best you can, trying to keep everyone happy but knowing that there will be triumphs and disappointments along the way, and that the best you can really hope for is to land somewhere in the middle. Only at the climax does the game break its rules, removing the chance for compromise and forcing you to make a final decision that'll affect not just the end of the Kaplans' summer, but the rest of their lives as well. To sweeten the pill it gives you the bad news first, and ends on an up note. After all you and the family have been through, you'll need it.

8



ABOVE The family's thoughts come in snippets that sketch outlines of their feelings. When Dan and Linda pass on the stairs they speak in clipped sentences, telegraphing the strain on their relationship. **LEFT** You spend the entirety of the game as a hidden voyeur, but it feels justifiable since you are here to help. Only at night, as you watch the Kaplans sleep and lean close to Dan to whisper your life-changing decisions in his ear, do you start to feel a bit creepy

BELOW Memory-reading sections freeze the protagonists in place, giving you free movement around the house. You'll still find yourself using light fittings, though, as it's a quicker way of getting around



ABOVE Timmy's drawings tug at the heartstrings even when they portray happier times than this. They benefit from the absence of the functional, and often wooden, spoken delivery of his parents' diaries and letters



Blacklight: Retribution

That *Blacklight: Retribution*'s business model is the most noteworthy thing about it speaks volumes. Its free-to-play assault on players' wallets is a singular point of interest in an otherwise derivative, uninspired futuristic FPS. Play a few rounds, turn your console off and a few moments later you'll struggle to recall anything special about it – bar that creator Zombie Studios has its eye fixated on cash money.

Though the game appeared on PC in 2012, newcomers shouldn't worry about missing any vital plot points in this sequel to 2010's forgettable *Tango Down*, since there are none. The game cuts through any small talk, places a gun in your hand and tells you to have at its multiplayer modes, while simultaneously crippling your ability to do so without spending money.

As with many other free-to-play shooters, *Retribution* is only really free if you're perfectly content with a heavily restricted loadout. The economy follows the typical structure, with in-game and real-world currencies sitting side by side. But Zombie is stingy about letting players try things out for free: if you want to get a proper feel for *Retribution*, you're paying with either your time or your cash.

Retribution is neither shy nor subtle in its attempts to goad you into opening your wallet. Accessing items without forking out real-world money is technically feasible through the accumulation of experience points, but gaining enough to let you rent a single gun for a day takes several hours of heavy grinding. The only way to unlock items permanently is by handing over Zcoins, which you can buy in bulk from the PlayStation Store. A hefty £4.25 will grant you 500 Zcoins, which will cover one gun or unlock an additional quick loadout slot. Filling that slot with new weapons and items will cost even more, and you quickly begin to see that the game is pushing you towards the 10,000 Zcoins bundle, priced at a pass-the-smelling-salts £84.99.

There are some solid enough systems beneath the business model: controls are precise, responsive, and satisfying in short bursts, even if matches can lack excitement or immediacy. But the brief rush of competitive combat comes to an end the second you realise that player skill is largely irrelevant and you've got no chance against a player who's paid for better equipment than you, even if you have superior aim or have armed yourself with greater map knowledge.

Worse is the fact that not even those who pay up are guaranteed a good time. All too often the game's servers struggle to populate a quick match, and you can expect crippling latency when they do. The available modes – including Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, Capture The Flag, Kill Confirmed and Domination – are as bare bones a framework as a modern multiplayer shooter could offer. Still, at least Domination's number-matching minigame, in which you press left or right on the D-pad four consecutive times to capture a node, puts a tense spin on a familiar formula. Kill Confirmed suffers the worst from latency, since the game often fails to register player tag pickups until moments after the fact, at which point you're likely to be shot for staring at your feet for too long.

Publisher Perfect World
Developer Zombie Studios
Format PC, PS4 (version tested)
Release Out now

The brief rush of competitive combat comes to an end the second you realise player skill is largely irrelevant



Maps are as devoid of character as the game modes, almost entirely built around blue and grey industrial backdrops save for a few memorable landmarks and points of interest. They're also littered with secret pathways, balconies, alleyways and elevators with which to evade and flank your opponents. Unfortunately, their sprawling nature also means you could be wandering around for up to a minute without any contact, especially given that the turnover of new players unfamiliar with the maps is high.

There are two mechanics that give *Retribution* some kind of respectability. The first of these is the HRV, short for Hyper Reality Visor, which makes a return from *Tango Down*. This gives you a limited amount of X-ray vision with which to spot allies and enemy players across the arena. Coupled with the labyrinthine maps, this ability could potentially introduce some tactical team play – at least if the average drop-in player wasn't more interested in straightforward running and gunning to get their kicks.

Then there's *Retribution*'s in-match points system, entirely separate from the other two economies, which you can use to unlock healing items, flamethrowers and wearable, mecha-like Hardsuits on the fly. Performing actions on the battlefield will accrue Combat Points (CP), which you retain even on death, and these can be traded in at a depot for your desired tool of mass destruction. At 1,300 CP, the Hardsuits are the most expensive, and little wonder given their potential to turn a match around. It's worrying to see just how few are deployed at the time of writing, however. The game does such a poor job of explaining the CP system that new players – who make up a sizeable percentage of any given match right now – are unlikely to know that it's there, or that it doesn't require them to make a purchase.

Despite its age, *Retribution* is technically still in beta on PS4, but what's here will hardly have you holding your breath in anticipation of what's to come. Zombie seems to have neglected to account for the fact that free-to-play games are vying for a player's time as well as their money. At a base level, this is simply too forgettable to give players a good enough reason to return. Perhaps it would be different if Zombie had been more lenient with its economy, allowing you to try more before committing to buy. *Retribution* may be free to play, but you're also free to walk away. Right now, in the interests of saving both time and money, that's the smarter option.

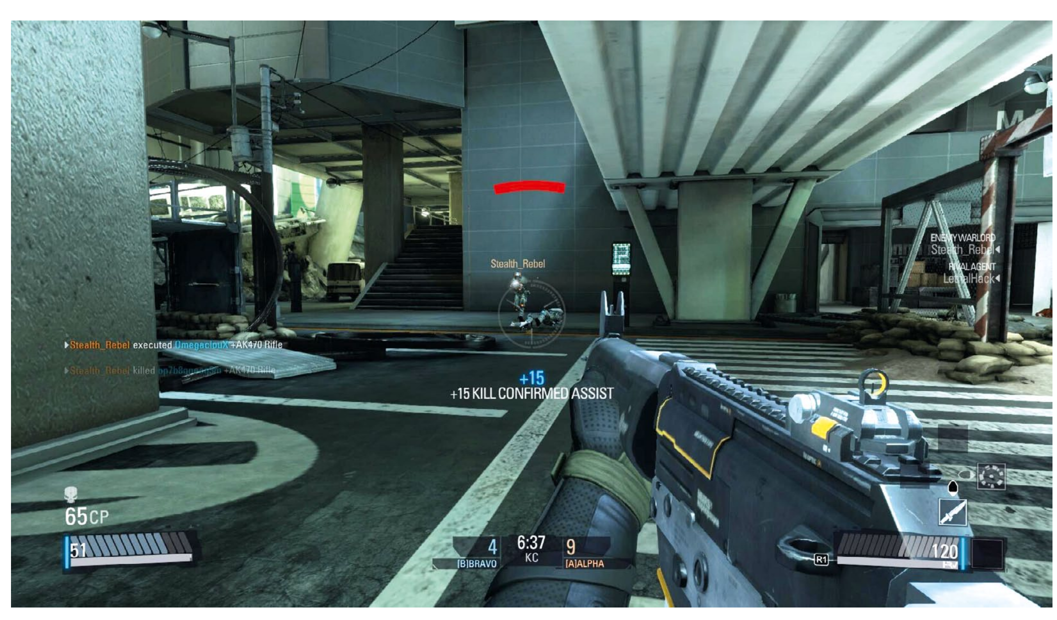
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LEFT The Hyper Reality Visor lets you see where other players are on the map, but its use is limited to short bursts. The transition in and out of HRV view also leaves you vulnerable to enemy fire

TOP The Containment map features plenty of alternative pathways for players to traverse the battlefield, but not all of these are distinctive and it's a little too easy to get lost. ABOVE Summoning an armoured Hardsuit can turn the odds in your favour. When it works, at least; several times we completed the summon animation only to have our mail-order unit fail to show



With the exception of a few maps, *Retribution*'s colour palette rarely goes beyond shades of grey, and telling player soldiers apart can be a tricky process

Doki-Doki Universe

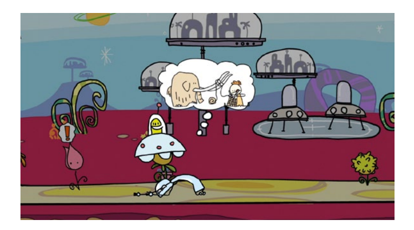
Publisher SCE
Developer HumaNature Studios
Format PS3, PS4 (tested), Vita
Release Out now

Poor QT3. Our robot protagonist was deposited on a planet by his human employers, and he's been waiting there for 32 years. One day Jeff, a three-eyed alien, turns up and advises QT3 that he and his kind are to be discontinued, because these days robots are a little more human. So unless QT3 can learn enough about humanity to get himself up to speed, he's bound for the scrap heap.

This is the start of a trek from one themed planet to the next – a familiar setup from a team headed up by Greg Johnson, creator of *ToeJam & Earl* – in a bid to learn more about the human condition. On each planet there are people, animals and objects in need of help or cheering up. By talking to other residents, you'll discover their likes and dislikes, and potential solutions to their problems, most of which you can conjure from thin air so long as you've found the appropriate object in one of the gift-wrapped presents that are dotted around the universe.

It's sweet stuff, but repetition quickly sets in: this is a game of walking to and fro, talking to people before searching your stock of summonables for the object of their desires. Only 20 can be displayed onscreen at once, and while you can bring up another random selection with a button press, you'll spend far too long rummaging around before reluctantly accepting that you can't help after all. This planet-hopping and present-snatching was fine in *ToeJam & Earl* but games, like *Doki-Doki Universe*'s robots, have moved on.

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Space Hulk

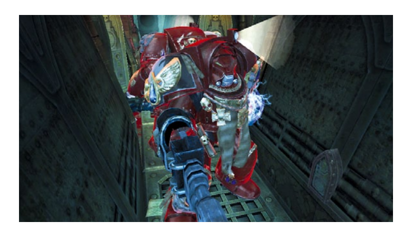
Publisher/developer Full Control
Format iOS (tested), PC
Release Out now

Obtuse, clunky and cultish could be the manifesto of the Warhammer 40,000 universe's Imperium Of Man. And the very same terms could be ascribed to this conversion of turn-based boardgame Space Hulk. It's an Aliens pastiche: small squads of Games Workshop's Space Marines attempt to complete objectives in a warren of tight corridors while harassed by Xenomorph-alikes. Singleplayer focuses exclusively on the exploits of the Marines, while multiplayer – live or asynchronous – recycles the scenarios but gives one player control of the razor-clawed aliens.

The troubles begin with the interface, which has borrowed the look of 2012's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, but too little of its clarity. Possible actions – shoot, overwatch, guard – are denoted by tiny icons, and holding a finger over them merely reminds you of their name, not tactical function. They're overlaid on the grim darkness of the hulk itself, which adds eye-straining murk to often dull levels. The detailed character models are faithful to GW's miniatures, but animations are frequently low quality.

Worse, for a game driven by dice and a detailed ruleset, both are hidden away, with roll results relegated to a tiny box. This obfuscates the game's element of luck, making events feel more random than they ought to. Bugs and crashes only add to the frustrations. Boardgame fans might be able to overlook these sins to find the deep game within, but Full Control has done too little to evangelise the cult of Space Hulk.

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Samurai Gunn

Publisher Maxistentialism
Developer Teknopants
Format PC
Release Out now

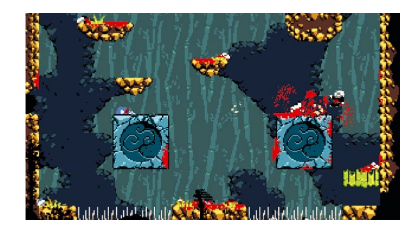
Samurai were never this fast, surely. Teknopants' fourplayer singlescreen brawler licks along at a frightening pace, a combination of lightning-fast character movement and one-hit kills meaning its matches rarely last more than a minute.

It's deceptively simple. Each player picks a cluster of pixels whose colours are plucked straight from *Street Fighter*, and the action begins. Whoever you choose has a Meat Boy-style wall jump; a sword with sideways, downward and upward slashes; and that titular gun, which affords you just three bullets per life. When two swords meet, they cancel out, the force pushing both players back across the screen. You can even reflect bullets with perfectly timed slashes.

There's more to the maps than meets the eye, too, with *Pac-Man*-style portals in the scenery letting you pop out behind an opponent or shoot them in the back from across the screen. Environmental hazards include destructible bamboo and icicles to knock from ceilings, while water renders guns useless. Our current favourite map is Pull, whose two joined platforms edge farther apart every couple of kills until the gap is too wide for even your enormous jump arc.

It's a masterclass of design purity: every one of these elements exists for a reason, and its potential is exploited to the fullest. But *Samurai Gunn*'s genius lies in its dizzying speed. It condenses organic, balletic setpieces worthy of an action-flick finale into mere seconds, the ground filling up with the bloodied pixel remains of the fallen.

8



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

People, Places, Things gets underway on p108, with Square Enix's Yoshinori Kitase discussing how Star Wars led him to work in videogames, and how he ended up spearheading *Final Fantasy*. In Places on p110, we return to Los Santos in a look at Rockstar's most successful piece of worldbuilding. Things on p112 offers a chance to retrace the steps of gaming's breadcrumb trails and identify the ways that games lead players by the hand, often without us really noticing it. Then on p114, Finnish developer Housemarque talks independent development, working with Sony to launch a console and developing games in secret in our Studio Profile. And in The Making Of… on p118, we return to *Silent Hill* for a look at Climax's ambitious reboot, *Shattered Memories*, tracing it from its *Brahms PD* origins and through its time as frosty physiological adventure *Cold Heart* to the game that challenged the very nature of survival horror. Our columnists sign off the issue with some closing thoughts. Tadhg Kelly (p122) considers the science and art of game design, and looks at why it is so difficult to teach effectively. Clint Hocking (p124) takes on the notion of allowing players to create their own experiences and share them though the lens of his own title, *Far Cry 2*, which took early steps into the realms of user-generated content quite by accident. Finally, James Leach (p126) explores the utility of made-up languages, from confounding consumers to creating very deliberate distance between player and game.



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Climax Studios created its own *Silent Hill* protagonist, psychology student Jessica, who featured on the cover of its *Cold Heart* pitch. On p118, we discover how those ideas crystallised into *Shattered Memories*

People

YOSHINORI KITASE

Final Fantasy's overseer on defining the Japanese RPG

Kitase's most recent efforts have involved shepherding *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* for PS3 and Vita. The package arrived in Japan in late December; a western release is due in March

Over the past decade, many of Square Enix's best-known designers have left the company – and none more high profile than Hironobu Sakaguchi. He joined Square in 1983 as a part-time designer, going on to become its director of planning and development, and ultimately its US president. **Yoshinori Kitase**, one of Sakaguchi's protégées, is among the few remaining staff from the glory days when the company established and expanded the Japanese RPG blueprint. He's worked on titles such as *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VII* and Square's high-profile collaboration with Disney, *Kingdom Hearts*. Today, he pilots the *Final Fantasy* brand – Sakaguchi's creation and a series that has sold more than 100 million units to date. It's one of the most senior creative positions in games, but holding it was never Kitase's goal.

"When I was growing up, I was only interested in comics, baseball, magic tricks and the paranormal," he says. Kitase grew up in Fussa City, part of the Tokyo metropolitan area that, during the 1970s, wasn't yet urbanised. Outdoors, he'd play baseball with his friends, or catch insects in the nearby woods. Indoors, he'd draw comics featuring his friends. This talent for art solidified into a vocational calling when he saw Star Wars for the first time. "At the time, the only sci-fi movies you saw on TV featured little model spaceships held by wires," he says. "Even as a child, I could tell that they were fake. But Star Wars didn't use wires. The spaceships looked massive and real. I saw a documentary that explained how they used visual magic to make a metre-long model look like a gigantic 1,600m-long battleship and was entranced by the world of visual effects."

Entrancement turned into an obsession and, after studying film at university, he sought a career in movies, joining an animation production studio. "It was a small-scale studio, so I got to experience every single stage of the animation process, including project management, the actual animation, colouring the cells and helping with the photography. It was an important and hugely valuable experience."

Around this time, Kitase played Enix's formative computer RPG, *Dragon Quest*. "I was hooked on RPGs after that and played loads of them," he recalls. "*Final Fantasy* was one of the games I played at that time. I remember being struck by Yoshitaka Amano's mature art style; it was so different to the classic Japanese comic-book look of other RPGs at the time… The graphics were simple 2D pixel sprites, but I remember them having an amazing expressive quality within those limits. Even then, I strongly felt that this was a media in which you could depict great dramas."

Kitase quit his animation job after a year and, while browsing a game magazine, saw an advertisement to join Square in the classifieds. "Up until that point, I was still looking for a film-related job, but I knew that the team behind *Final Fantasy* was putting a huge amount of effort into its visuals, so I applied immediately."

Kitase had no programming experience or game design knowledge and so for his interview with Sakaguchi he showed a five-minute stop-motion animation piece he'd created at university. It worked. His first assignment at Square was on the Game Boy title *Seiken Densetsu* (the first entry in the *Secret Of Mana* series, retitled *Final Fantasy Adventure* for its English-language release). The team was small even for the time: two veteran designers supported by four new hires, including Kitase. "I slept at work every night at that time," he recalls. "I can remember that Mr Tokita, the lead programmer on *Final Fantasy IV*, and other colleagues would play guitars and laugh and chat while I arranged three chairs by the side of my desk as a makeshift bed and fell asleep watching them out of the corner of my eye."

"When I first joined Square, the view of games from wider society was one of a niche subculture"

It was a formative time, living at the studio while learning game design. But in the medium's early days, the game industry was stigmatised in Japan. Despite this, Kitase's family supported his career move. "All through my education and career, I've been drawn to subcultures. My childhood hobbies were comics and the occult; my subject at university was film. My family had come to accept this from an early age. They allowed me to do what I wanted to do."

Kitase's rise through the ranks was quick. In 1994, he was offered the position of director on the terrifically ambitious SNES game *Final Fantasy VI*. "It was a hugely exciting time," he says. "I can remember how amazing our designers' ideas felt on that game. We all could see the future possibilities in games."

Despite the excitement, the challenges of working with limited memory were severe. "It was a huge struggle trying to fit everything within those limitations. All the data section sizes and the memory addresses that handled their distribution had not yet been automated. We had to input them all by hand, a practice that would be completely unthinkable today."

During this time, Sakaguchi, who wrote most of Square's in-house releases, mentored Kitase. "Sakaguchi's great imagination and incredible decisiveness have stuck with me," Kitase says. "His game ideas always came from a totally unfettered imagination; they were not bound by the conventions of previous known design. I have such strong memories of when we switched platforms to the PlayStation for *Final Fantasy VII*. The switch to 3D graphics caused a massive change in the company's creative workflow. But Sakaguchi made the necessary decisions so quickly and confidently. It was inspiring."

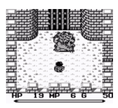
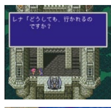
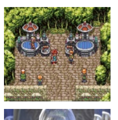
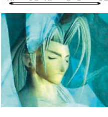
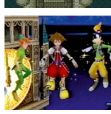
Kitase has been at the frontline of industry change. "In the beginning, the atmosphere was one of a small university arts or technology club. Today, it's a market with Hollywood-scale productions. When I first joined Square, the view of games from wider society was one of a niche subculture; it was underground and impenetrable."

Kitase's interest in making games more approachable stems from what he saw at this time. "My father would complain that he had no idea what was going on when I played RPGs at home after school," he says. "This made me want to make games something that those watching the screen next to the player could also find interesting. That's one of the reasons I've pushed 3D CG graphics and voice acting."

While Kitase feels that there is still a great deal of work for him to do in helping games to become truly mainstream, he is less interested in his own legacy than that of those who follow: "I would like nothing more than for the next generation to aim to produce famous creators like Kurosawa or Spielberg – people who leave their mark on entertainment history." ■

CV

URL www.square-enix.com
Selected softography *Seiken Densetsu/Final Fantasy Adventure* (1991), *Final Fantasy V* (1992), *Chrono Trigger* (1995), *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), *Kingdom Hearts* (2002), *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* (2013)




Places

LOS SANTOS

This mirror LA is a perfect match for Rockstar's lampooning eye

Where other open-world titles tend to repeat assets to cover ground, Los Santos is as diverse as a real-world county. The effort expended in creating the region is evident from this image, assembled by game mapper Ian Albert

ian-albert.com

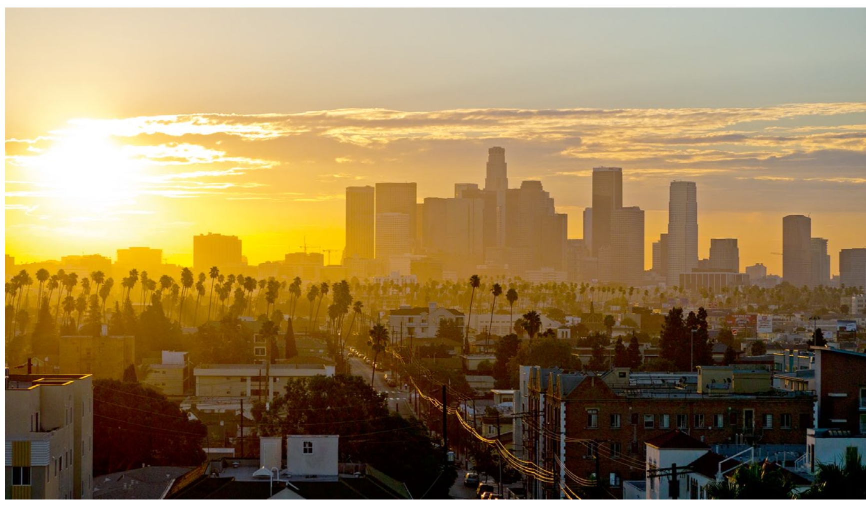
From *GTA, GTA: San Andreas, GTAV*
Developer Rockstar North
Origin UK
Debut 2004

The French novelist Henry De Montherlant wrote, "Happiness writes in white ink on a white page." His argument was that, from Charles Dickens to Ian McEwan, only fiction's tragedies, trials, aberrations and villains lodge in the mind; the good guys and the good things that happen to them are, a few notable exceptions aside, forgettable. It's a belief that's seemingly characterised the work of Rockstar North, the developer of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, whose rogues' gallery of gangsters, mobsters and tricksters has smeared dark stories across our screens for the past 17 years. Our protagonists lie and cheat for every last dollar, grinding into the sand the heads of those they clamber over, and, in doing so, imprinting themselves in our memories.

But if *GTA*'s villainous cast lacks beauty, the worlds these characters inhabit exude the stuff. And perhaps none more so than Los Santos, the sun-baked fictional analogue to Los Angeles that took the leading role in 2004's *San Andreas* and the most successful title in the series to date, *GTAV*. Seeing it produces the kind of impression that does stick in the mind – not only for its looks and vistas but also for its unshakable sense of place. *GTAV*'s vast geography, 49 square virtual miles of the stuff, stretches from the Los Santos International Airport in the south of the city, through the central district, bordered by the Del Perro and La Puerta freeways and the Los Santos river, up through the Tongva Valley, over the San Chianski Mountains and back down to Blaine County and the lapping ocean beyond. But the city is the focal point for the game's drama, a whirlpool of human life, lights and activity into which we are irresistibly drawn.

What better place for Rockstar North to pick over contemporary America's human detritus than here?

Los Angeles is, perhaps more than the subtly warped Miami and New York-alikes of the other *GTA* games, the ideal setting for the series. "Imagine a city full of people ruthlessly pursuing wealth, fame and self-improvement, at any cost," invites *GTAV*'s manual. "Where everyone you met was either a celebrity, trying to be a celebrity, or used to be a celebrity…" Indeed, it's a city of juxtapositions, from the ultra-rich movie stars who inhabit the echoing mansions of Beverly Hills (or Rockford Hills in Rockstar's fiction) to the shuffling homeless people that trudge along Skid Row (Mission Row). There's the smog, guffed out by the oily traffic of the city's eight-lane freeways, which blankets some of the most spectacular coastline in all of America. Its cement flatlands rub against forested mountainsides; police helicopters buzz alongside screeching eagles. Saul Bellow wrote of the place: "In Los Angeles, all the loose objects in the country were collected, as if America had been tilted and everything that wasn't tightly screwed down had slid into Southern California." What better place for Rockstar North to pick over contemporary America's human detritus than here, in the confused county?



This is a place built up in distinct regions and districts, approximating the way that real-world cities evolve over the decades

As with all of Rockstar's fiction, Los Santos is an amalgam of the real and the imagined. The 'Santos' of its name means 'Saints' in Spanish, a typical dual play on words from Rockstar, sidling up against the 'Angels' of real-world Los Angeles and playing off against the unsaintly characters that flit across the game's landscape. *GTAV*'s team reportedly conducted more than a hundred days of research in Los Angeles, taking thousands of photographs and countless hours of video.

The exacting research is clear to see, even in the perverted names: Los Angeles' Bunker Hill becomes Pillbox Hill, Bel Air morphs into Richman, Hollywood and its signage transmogrify into Vinewood, while Compton becomes the impoverished, gang-torn Davis. The city isn't an exact recreation of Los Angeles, but it is, in a sense, a perfected recreation. The famous landmarks are all present and correct, as are the most important residential districts. But the fat has been trimmed, the sprawl tightened – an urban surgery to improve what the city's planners could never have anticipated or managed in the real world. The game world's contents are familiar but condensed; it is the Los Angeles of dreams, even if, in narrative terms, they are often nightmares.

In August this year, **Aaron Garbut**, the art director charged with the creation of Los Santos, talked about what he views as the city's most interesting asset. "The buildings, the people, the cars, the architecture, even the smog, it all centres around the sunshine," he said. "There's poverty, violence, and a real underside to the city, but it's the sun that gets you first."

Garbut's viewpoint is echoed by the game, which refers to the city as a place where "nature's bounty" means you can "enjoy perfect weather all year round" and where the "air [is] so good you [can] literally see and taste it".

"Dare to dream, because that city exists," Rockstar North invites, with typical overstatement. But it is right. Los Santos exists in part in the Los Angeles of our reality, in part in the zeroes and ones etched into the game's disc, but most importantly and most enduringly in our minds, where its concrete contours have become a part of our own internal stock of mind maps. Stand upon Los Santos' brightest monuments – the Maze Bank Tower, the Vinewood sign or even the end of Del Perro pier (a lovingly rendered homage to Santa Monica's pier). There, watch the sun wheel down in the sky and the light bruise from white to yellow to purple and know that, when it comes to this city, happiness doesn't write white. ■



Things

BREADCRUMB TRAILS

Why game designers are leading us all on

DICE's Runner Vision allows players to quickly assess the best routes through *Mirror's Edge*'s stark environments by picking out key features in easy-to-parse red

Be it a poorly signposted objective, an obfuscated pathway, or a baffling maze, being left with no clear idea of how to progress ranks among game design's most heinous sins. But no player wants to be led by the nose, either, leaving developers with a formidable challenge in searching for a sweet spot between clarity and player freedom.

"It's very tough, because while many people argue that they don't want any hints, what they actually want is just the right amount," says **Simon Flesser**, one half of Swedish studio Simogo. "And that is, of course, very subjective."

Simogo's lauded iOS adventure *Year Walk* demonstrates the studio's willingness to give the player plenty of space. But while the illusion of freedom this creates is powerful, it's still an illusion. "While it might seem that we're leaving the players to their own devices a lot in *Year Walk*," says Flesser, "we're constantly nudging them in some direction. We wanted to communicate the feeling of being lost in *Year Walk*, but that was tough, because just walking around being lost will eventually only amount to being frustrated."

It's a problem that developers tackle in a variety of ways, some more obvious than others. It could be lining up collectables along a path, using lighting to draw the eye, or even the volume of an environmental sound effect. Take *Dead Space*'s memorable RIG suits and their locator system: when activated, a holographic projection of the route to your next objective emanates ahead of you, simultaneously reassuring you that you're on the right path and removing any need to use the game's less elegantly designed 3D map. It's a literal, albeit futuristic, representation of the breadcrumb trail, but one entirely in keeping with the game's fiction. And it shows that tension needn't be diminished even if you do know your way through the dark.

Such consistency is key to making breadcrumb trails work. "3D *Mario* and *Zelda* games do a terrific job of communicating objectives by their visual language and level designs alone," says Flesser. "Just by looking at structures, you can usually make out a number of things: whether a jump is possible, or if you'd need to return to the same spot with a new ability and so on."

Of course, Nintendo's designers also make use of coin and enemy placement to lead you through these colourful worlds, and encourage you to explore away from the most obvious path.



Fable II **was designed with non-gamers in mind, a key feature its trail of floating gold particles that lead you to your next quest**

And there are plenty of other exemplars, too: the accent colours that paint a path through the austere environments of *Mirror's Edge*, or the way *Alan Wake* ensures that future locations stand out from its mountainous vistas.

Lately, however, it has become increasingly fashionable for games to subvert the notion of there being any kind of designed path at all. *Portal*'s ultimate reward is discovering parts of the level its architects apparently didn't want you to see – you rebel against the path that has been created for you in order to forge your own. It's a construct, of course, but an eminently satisfying one. More recently, *The Stanley Parable* has taken this idea further, setting up a world that goads you into trying to break it. Of course, developer Galactic Cafe is still waiting at the edges of its design to recognise your efforts.

"I get super-stressed watching someone play a section where we've given them a lot of freedom"

"With *The Stanley Parable*, we often left things open-ended in development just to see what people would try to do and craft the game to respond to that," says creator **Davey Wreden**. "I always get super-stressed watching someone play a section where we've given them a lot of freedom, hoping they'll find the hints we've laid!"

Galactic Cafe level designer **William Pugh** lays out the risk and reward in letting players take the initiative: "Pacing factors into [breadcrumb trails] a great deal. Sometimes you can't afford to have a player wander around for five minutes, banging their head against the wall. But if you're willing to go out on a limb and leave it entirely up to the player, you stand to gain a lot when they discover the next piece of the puzzle and it leaves them feeling really satisfied. Spending a bit of time tuning the design really pays off."

There's nothing wrong with heading along a glowing path towards the diamond HUD marker that floats over your next destination, of course, and as game worlds continue to increase in complexity and size, clear direction is more important than ever. But when it comes to progression, as opposed to navigation, subtle signposting appears to offer the greatest rewards.

"I think there's a big difference in presenting a problem itself, rather than presenting a problem as a problem," says Flesser. "Often, the former works well enough. But personally, I'd much rather pique players' curiosity through the intrigue of a problem [rather] than us as creators telling them they should now solve a problem because we say so."

It's easy to associate breadcrumb trails with linear journeys, but they are important to all games, irrespective of whether they're a platformer or sandbox. "*Minecraft* has no breadcrumbs in the traditional sense," Wreden notes, "but the game world is so consistent that it creates a kind of meaning between each discrete experience you have in it; you understand how everything you're doing is tied together in some invisible way. This is the feeling that breadcrumbs are trying to evoke, that this place you're inhabiting is a consistent, breathing world and that your presence in it makes sense." ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Housemarque

How Finland's oldest development house thrives in a land defined by billion-dollar mobile games

1 Early enemy and stage designs from *Resogun.* 2 *Outland's Ikaruga*-inspired light/dark switching had to be quickly readable by players mid-action. 3 *Super Stardust HD's* ship is a gun with wings from any viewing angle.

4 An early render of *Super Stardust Delta's* first boss, Hadronus. 5 Top-down shooter *Dead Nation's* foes range from grotesque to comic. 6 *Furmins'* heraldic crests are a key part of the game's colourful, mobile-friendly style.

Based in central Helsinki, Housemarque operates entirely in English. That might surprise you, but while Terramarque and Bloodhouse merged in 1995 to form what was once a resolutely Finnish studio, Finland has grown as a centre for development, and much of the talent fuelling the expansion has come from outside the country. Housemarque had to adapt or die – which could have served as the studio's mantra over the past 19 years.

"Our internal blog is in English, our wiki is in English; pretty much everything is in English," Italian- and English-speaking community manager **Tommaso De Benetti** says. "Sometimes I'm the only one in the meeting who doesn't speak Finnish, and everybody speaks English for my benefit, but then I leave the meeting and I can hear they keep speaking English. I don't think they even think about it any more."

"It was a cultural change that had to be made at some point," head of self-publishing **Mikael Haveri** says. "And it makes sense for the future. If we want to be open for people coming from abroad, you have to have that culture there, otherwise they get shunned."

Finland's explosive growth as a centre for development was triggered by its vast talent surplus following the collapse of tech giant Nokia, and has largely focused on mobile and Facebook gaming. Housemarque remains one of the nation's elder statesmen, and was for a brief moment the only Finnish studio working exclusively in the console space. Over the years, the studio has moved from PC to console to mobile and back to console. It now juggles the latter platforms, seeing the release of iOS puzzler *Furmins* in 2012 and PS4's lauded arcade space shooter *Resogun* at the console's launch in 2013.

"I think there are many people trying to figure out how Finns are so good at coding," CEO and co-founder **Ilari Kuittinen** says. "I think it must be the cold winters we have out here; we have to figure out something else to do inside. In Finnish culture, it's OK to stay at your house or your office and do that coding stuff, because in wintertime you're not expected to go out and be active. In other cultures, it's sort of shameful to be spending 24 hours at the desktop, but here it's like, 'Hey, you utilised your time well.' It's a cultural thing."

Kuittinen is the former head of Terramarque and a longtime business brain who helped his friends publish their games on the 8bit



From left: head of self-publishing Mikael Haveri, community manager Tommaso De Benetti and founder/CEO Ilari Kuittinen

Commodore 64 in the '80s. The studio's other founder, Harri Tikkanen, is a veteran of the Amiga demo scene and now heads up the studio's gaming output as creative director.

Mobile gaming is inescapable in Helsinki, even for Housemarque, but the studio's growth was fuelled by Sony, not Apple or Google. Its early games on PC and later experiments with N-Gage and Gizmondo never approached the spectacular success of *Super Stardust* on PS3, which not only secured the studio's survival, but defined the games it makes. "When we got to do *Super Stardust* and got in on PS3 early, it was the rebirth of the company," Kuittinen says. "I think we were one of the few guys who were successful in that [downloadable game] field at the time, with the *Castle Crashers* guys and RedLynx, maybe. That was certainly a bright moment. I think almost all the years before that were kind of the darkest hours. We did a lot of little gigs, trying to pitch PS2 and PSP games. We thought PSP would be a great platform for smaller titles, but for some reason publishers didn't see it that way, and I guess that was part of the reason why we weren't that successful. Those were dark, dark hours, going to the trade shows and thinking, 'This is the last time we'll visit E3; this is the last time we're going to be here.'"

"When we got to do Super Stardust and got in on PS3 early, it was the rebirth of the company"

Housemarque laid the groundwork for *Super Stardust*'s PS3 exclusivity with its support work on Guerrilla's *Killzone: Liberation* for PSP. "One of the games we had was this action-adventure game that we tried to pitch for PS2, *Trader*, but it was a bit too late in the cycle," Kuittinen says. "We started to do PS2 engine stuff and we had ported our engine to PSP, and I think people were impressed. I think that maybe influenced Guerrilla and they asked us to help them out.

"There was this time during the spring of 2006 when Sony wanted to compete with XBLA and started to contact developers like us. At the end of the PS2 era, we thought, 'Oh shit, we can't do another pitch.' I mean, it used cost us a million euros in order to make even the sales material back then. But then XBLA started this thing, and we've been able to create lots of new IPs and new games within that niche."



Founded 1995
Employees 50
Key staff Ilari Kuittinen (CEO and co-founder), Harri Tikkanen (creative director and co-founder)
URL www.housemarque.com
Selected softography *Super Stardust*, *TransWorld Snowboarding*, *Outland*, *Resogun*
Current projects Unannounced mobile game, unannounced PS4 shooter

Dead Nation, *Outland*, *Super Stardust Delta* and *Resogun* followed, with a brief interlude during which the team worked on 360 and PS3 ports of *Angry Birds* for its friends at Rovio. It was a straightforward project, Kuittinen says, "in the sense there were only a few guys working on it. I think we had the technology there, we had the engine, and we just had to upgrade the graphics and add Kinect and Move support."

Housemarque moved into a new larger studio space just six months ago, during development on *Resogun*. The space is small compared to the nearby Supercell or Remedy, but large in comparison to most Xbox Live Arcade and PSN developers. There's a team of 50 here, dividing work between a new mobile game and another PS4-exclusive shooter. And there's a sense that while the mobile games and ports pay the bills, it's really games with arcade sensibilities that the studio adores. A MAME cabinet sits in the studio's communal space, running *Bubble Bobble*, *Frogger*, *Galaga*, *Pac-Man*, *Spy Hunter* and *Donkey Kong*. On a recent visit to New York, studio co-founder Harri Tikkanen played for two hours on an *Arkanoid* machine at a bar. Arcade gaming is in the studio's blood, dating from Bloodhouse's Amiga title *Stardust* in 1993.

"We'd love to have *Resogun* in the arcade," Haveri explains. "We could make an actual custom faceplate with custom buttons and sticks. Arcades were special. When graphics weren't so good, those pixels created a vision in our minds, and all of that encompasses the soul of gaming. To us, there's that certain soul that we want to take forward."





On the surface, the cute and cuddly *Furmins* (above) has little in common with *Super Stardust HD* (left), but they're both gamer's games of sorts: one is a sit-forward sensory assault, the other a sit-back logic test, each offering a particular brand of challenge

"I think it's great we can be an ambassador for this genre we think is one of the greatest genres," Kuittinen says. "Shooters are the essence of gaming… and I hope people want to give [*Resogun*] a go and find out why we're so enthusiastic about it. We've been doing different types of games, but even those games have that kind of arcade feel, where when you do a cool combination of moves and get the multiplier up, it's a real emotional reward."

But as much as the studio loves arcade gaming, its shooters – *Super Stardust*, *Super Stardust Delta* and *Resogun* – are a deliberate challenge to arcade convention, built for long plays and instant accessibility. *Resogun* is easier to play than *Super Stardust Delta*, which was easier than *Super Stardust*, but the team is quick to point out that all of these games have a high skill ceiling. Anyone can play them and feel good, but mastery is a reward in itself.

"There's this wide audience of younger people that don't really get it at first," Haveri says. "They never grew up with these kinds of games. That we were able to give *Resogun* away for free [to] PS Plus subscribers means a lot of people will experience it and hopefully go through that self-discovery of what arcade gaming was for our generation. Giving the game away for free is the best gift [for] us, because we're passing on that feeling of self-discovery."

> "I think it's great we can be an ambassador for this genre we think is one of the greatest genres"

Fire up PS4's Live On PlayStation channel and there are countless *Resogun* feeds, some from the best players in the world and others from those who can barely beat level one, but competence isn't a barrier to fun. Kuittinen compares it to tennis or golf: anyone can have fun swinging a racket or club without being the best in the world.

Housemarque is one of the few studios from the old days that was able to grow during gaming's upheaval over the past decade by embracing the digital niche rather than the mobile one. Through it all, the studio has respected its demo scene roots, pushing boundaries and taking on new challenges. In 2002, it developed the first console game ever made in Finland – *TransWorld Snowboarding* for Xbox – and two years earlier the studio began its first experiments with mobile gaming for WAP-capable phones.

"We had a spinoff company [Spring Toys] and raised equity of four or five million dollars," Kuittinen says. "Those were the crazy times before the Internet bubble burst, when a company didn't need anything but the idea to do mobile games and the background to make them." The studio realised it was too early, but the expertise it acquired lead to several mobile and Java games, including a Chronicles Of Narnia-based game for Buena Vista, which kept it afloat during Kuittinen's dark times. Even *Resogun*, in its way, is a boundary-pushing title. One of the highest-rated games from among PS4's launch lineup, it also uses the hardware in ways no other developer has tried, throwing voxels around using the graphics processor rather than the CPU. "We got a mention from Mark Cerny himself saying we were the only launch game using GPU compute," De Benetti says. "And I think you can see the connection with the demo scene just in the size of the game, and all it does. It's less than half a gig."

"I think everybody was influenced by the demo scene," says Haveri. "In Finland and a lot of Eastern European countries, there was a sense of pride to have that expensive hardware brought into your house, or your friend's house, and make it work until you fried all cylinders. If you weren't making them, you were watching them and finding them. There was always somebody in the neighbourhood who was more competent on the coding side than you."

"Could you make *Resogun* without all the voxels and the GPU compute and all that?" Kuittinen asks. "Sure, but new hardware allows you to do a lot of cool stuff. Voxels aren't anything new, but using them like this… I don't think this has been done before. Those kinds of technology challenges are always there, and when you have limited time to meet a console's launch, you need to try to push forward and hope for the best.

"We didn't have that much time, but on the other hand we have this history of building up technological infrastructure, so we didn't start from scratch. We have pretty solid technology there, which allows us to do stuff very efficiently, but it's all just to make the game more fun. Even though we try to make our internal technology state of the art, it's just a way to get more out of the game and get more stuff into the gameplay."

Housemarque sits in its own special niche. It's made golf games, snowboarding games, movie spinoffs, shooters and handheld ports; it's done so on PC, Gizmondo, Java and PS4. It has the technical expertise of a Remedy, but spends it on arcade shooters rather than high-end motion capture, being more concerned with the perfect feedback from a button press than a perfect set of teeth in a character's head. "Certainly I think that's what's pulling people to work here," Kuittinen says. "People are coming in saying, 'I want to do console games, and I want to do arcade games like the ones you're doing'. It's ingrained with people here; we grew up playing these games."

"It's about that emotional attachment to your childhood, I think," Haveri says. "For us, it's arcades; for a lot of guys who work here, it's usually console. Now mobile's becoming more prominent, but for now there's no nostalgic attachment to *Angry Birds*."

"But 15 years from now," Kuittinen says, "the kids of today will be applying to Rovio for the same reasons. [Some] 2,200 people are making games in Finland now and it's just going to keep growing. I remember Ilkka [Paananen, Supercell CEO] saying a year and a half ago, 'We'll be a billion-dollar industry in two years' time,' and here we are. In Finland back in 1995, it was just us and Remedy, about 30 people making games, and you couldn't have even imagined this would happen." ■



Ilari Kuittinen
CEO

Finland's renowned for mobile development. How do you change your development practices for the platform?
[Virtual sticks on a touchscreen] don't work; you have to figure out the strengths of a particular platform… But [there] are different categories of controller for different categories of games. Very few games can transfer between these realms. Sometimes it works, though; doing a touch-based shoot 'em up on iPad or something is a challenge, but you can do it, as we've been shown by Cave. I think most understand the strengths and weaknesses of different kinds of games. We wouldn't do anything like *Resogun* on tablets, for instance.

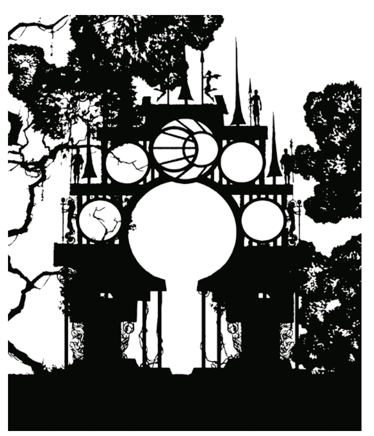
What's been the biggest change for you over the past 19 years?
Well, we're some of the oldest guys here in the industry – at least some of us are. Back in 1995, if you wanted to make a game and get it out there, you'd need to go to a publisher and have a deal, and they would then distribute those boxes to retailers so the consumer could have the game. It's a long process to get there, but now it's instantly available. You just have your phone and download it. That's it. It's a new thing for us to have this opportunity to launch globally. Little companies with a few guys can launch a game globally with a click of the button… That's amazing.

How does that differ to your work on Nokia handsets in the early 2000s?
We tried twice, first in 2000, then later with Java-approved games, but that was again a few years too early. There just wasn't this infrastructure. You had these problems with all these different devices. You could buy a Java game for €5 and find out it doesn't work, or you wouldn't know how to install it. The user experience just wasn't there. It was, 'I've downloaded this game. OK, what do I do now? I'll never download a game again.' It took the App Store to make it work.

It's surprising to see so many developers teaching children game development at schools and youth clubs here in Helsinki. Is Housemarque involved?
Yeah, we've been doing that. And there are these 'conversion' programmes for the people who can code, for instance, but can't make games. We've been involved in that and have recruited quite a few people in the process. Coding positions are pretty hard to fill because of the expansion of the industry over here.

Where do most of your staff come from?
We have three types of people coming in, I think: the first-timers who have their first job, then the people from Housemarque who want to come back, and then people from other companies. I think the demo scene dried up years ago, to be honest, so these people are coming from other sources like schools and other companies, and even people who haven't been doing games. We have nice success with that, with people who have a passion to make games.





Housemarque's new home is adorned with vector images inspired by its games, including a timeline graphic running down the entirety of the main hall

THE MAKING OF…

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories

How a British studio made the most innovative entry in the Silent Hill series

Shattered Memories' menagerie of monsters could have leapt straight out of a Francis Bacon canvas. Concepts for the Raw Shocks revolved around 'cancerous', 'sexy', 'frostbite' and, as in the above, 'abstract' variants

Format Wii, PS2, PSP
Publisher Konami
Developer Climax Studios
Origin UK
Release 2010

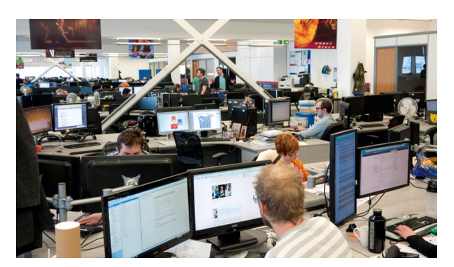
Faceless zombies. Nightmarish chases. Nerve-jangling bursts of static. *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* made no bones about wanting to terrify you. But the most shocking thing about it wasn't its monsters. It was the choice of lead platform. Released in December 2009 on Nintendo Wii, *Shattered Memories* was a bold – some might say foolhardy – attempt to take *Silent Hill* to a brand-new demographic: casual players. "We thought, this is a chance for us to engage with what is potentially quite a large audience," remembers **Sam Barlow**, lead designer at Climax Studios. "The pitch from us was always, 'How many people own a Wii? How many of those people have enjoyed watching a horror movie or psychological thriller?' We thought there were quite a lot of people we could sell this game to."

To understand the origin of *Shattered Memories*, you have to go right back to *Silent Hill: Origins* on PSP in 2007. It was the game that convinced Konami that the Portsmouth-based studio represented a safe pair of hands. It also gave Sam Barlow and his team a chance to save the day. Initially, *Origins* was being developed at Climax LA in Santa Monica, but it was a troubled project. After problems with the engine and a confused high-level vision for the game, Barlow's UK team were drafted in to pick up the pieces.

"It was bizarre," says the designer of the game they inherited. "It was supposed to be a dark comedy and, at some point, someone said Scrubs was [the inspiration]! We pushed back and said, 'Look, if this goes out, it will be a disaster. There's a hardcore fanbase [of *Silent Hill* players].' Konami said, 'You can change everything, but you've got to do it in the same time and budget.'"

With the clock ticking, Barlow rewrote the script, redesigned the levels and remade the creatures in just a week. When it shipped in November 2007, *Silent Hill: Origins* won Climax a substantial dose of publisher goodwill. Although no one knew it at the time, the Japanese-originated, American-set *Silent Hill* franchise had just found a new home in the UK.

The project that became *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* didn't start off on Wii. In fact, it didn't even start life as *Shattered Memories*. Instead, it evolved through several pitches under the watchful eye of a producer who wanted to revive the flagging survival horror series's fortunes. Along the way it lost several key *Silent Hill* touchstones (including the combat and the doomsday cult mythology) and gained a new gameplay element – a data-driven, under-the-hood system that psychologically profiled players as they played.



Although the story of Climax and *Silent Hill* began at Climax LA in Santa Monica, a UK team developed *Shattered Memories*

"The project that ended up on the shelves would never have been signed off by anyone up front," Barlow says of the total overhaul of the classic *Silent Hill* formula. "It wasn't like right back at the start we just pitched what became the game and everyone came on board. It very much just kind of meandered."

After *Silent Hill: Origins*' release in 2007, Konami wanted to follow it up with another PSP title. However, *Silent Hill*'s US producer, William Oertel, was pushing his own, rather unlikely, pet project. He was eager to make a Wii-based firstperson shooter, and invited Climax to pitch for it. The pitch became *Brahms PD*, a spinoff from the main franchise that cast players as an amnesiac police detective on the Brahms force looking for their missing partner.

Silent Hill: Cold Heart swapped the series' traditional foggy setting for a frozen world of snow and ice

Billed as "the world's first truly interactive psychological horror," *Brahms PD* planned to use in-game sessions with a police psychiatrist to analyse the player. Based on your responses, it would analyse your personality type and change the game's content accordingly – creating a wraparound nightmare tailored for each player. Inspired by his involvement in the interactive fiction community in the late 1990s, Barlow wanted the game to respond to players, not just to the choices they made but also to how they played the game.

When *Brahms PD* failed to find traction with Konami's higher-ups, Climax decided to put together another pitch for an original Wii outing that it named *Silent Hill: Cold Heart*. Swapping out the series' traditional foggy setting for a frozen world of snow and ice, *Cold Heart*'s story was based on a psychologically traumatised university student named Jessica as she explored the eerie town of Silent Hill.

Constructed with melee combat and puzzles, it featured dynamic sub-zero environments which required the player to scavenge food and clothing to keep their body temperature up. It also had a psychological profiling system similar to the one mooted in *Brahms PD* – a persistent feature in all of Climax's *Silent Hill* pitches. "With *Cold Heart*, the main thing in people's heads was, 'Wii's going to be really big; if we get a *Silent Hill* game on Wii, that's awesome,'" Barlow explains.

Although the producers were keen to get the project moving, it was obvious that getting such a radical overhaul made would involve cutting through a lot of corporate red tape. But, on a global database at Konami HQ, someone spotted a free pass. "At some point before *Origins* they'd greenlit the idea of a *Silent Hill* remake," Barlow explains. "The logic was, 'Hey, if we say this [Wii project] is a *Silent Hill* remake, it has already been greenlit and we can start working on this project right away." The seventh game in the *Silent Hill* franchise was suddenly a go.

The resurgence of the *Silent Hill* franchise in the late 2000s was largely thanks to the box-office success of Christophe Gans' multiplex-friendly spinoff movie. As responsibility for the franchise's evolution passed from east to west, the Silent Hill movie's reception convinced Konami US that there was a new casual audience for the series. "Anecdotally, the *Silent Hill* games touched on some of the broader demographics; they had these realistic, emotionally resonant stories, they had strong female characters," Barlow says. "There were a lot more people outside the more traditional demographics playing these story-driven games. For us, this was a real chance to engage with potentially quite a large audience."

As the concept evolved, *Silent Hill: Cold Heart* gave way to *Shattered Memories*. It took the core story of the original *Silent Hill* – Harry Mason searching a supernatural town for his missing daughter – and gave it a postmodern twist. It also made use of the Wii Remote as both crowbar and torch, and featured the same psychological profiling system that Barlow had been pushing since *Brahms PD* was first mooted.

Shattered Memories adapted a series of real-life profiling tests – including the Myers-Briggs psychometric questionnaire – and let its story evolve based on the player's unconscious actions, as well as their conscious ones. It would change visual details, dialogue, character actions and the game's ending in response to the player.

"The driving thing was exploring different

ways of using interactivity," Barlow says. "There's so much data that games take on board about their player – we know where you are, what you're looking at, how long you spend looking at things, what you're doing – but 99 per cent of games don't use any of that."

By tracking the Wii Remote flashlight as it moved around the screen, *Shattered Memories*' engine crunched data about what the player was looking at. Linger too long on a poster of a flimsily attired woman and the game would track that and add it to the dataset it was building up about your personality type. "Because the pointer interface was so responsive and fast, it meant you could walk into a room and just flick your eyes around and look over things. We had lovely detailed information on how the player was looking at things and how they were moving through the world." As the opening screen warned – or perhaps threatened – "This game plays you as much as you play it."

With its postmodern storyline, its innovative use of Wii Remote and its psychological profiling, *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* was shaping up to be a daring reimagining of the *Silent Hill* IP. It was so ambitious that there were concerns throughout development that Konami might be frightened into canning it. "Leading into our vertical slice, we were still referred to as the remake of *Silent Hill 1* on Wii," Barlow remembers. "We were given the guidance that there shouldn't be anything in the vertical slice that would cause people to question that this wasn't a straight remake [...] It was less than all-out deception; it was just making sure we showed things that wouldn't scare people away."

Barlow had one final innovation he wanted to push through: no combat. The original *Silent Hill* games featured clunky, close-quarter battles – and even *Silent Hill: Origins* had a sequence where the player got to mow down zombies with a machine gun. But since *Shattered Memories* was looking towards a broader audience on Wii, combat increasingly became a sticking point.

When William Oertel left the project, Barlow used the hiatus between producers to turn melee into pure evasion. "We knew we were changing producers and there was confusion at Konami, so we quickly lopped the design into the shape we wanted." As a result, the 'Nightmare' sequences – in which the world freezes and monsters attack – were now all about running and hiding.

At a time when survival horror was defined by the hardcore action of *Resident Evil 4*, the idea of a defenceless protagonist was daring. But Barlow was convinced it was essential to winning over Wii's non-core audience. "Combat didn't fit the idea of selling a horror game to a broad demographic. For example, the point where my girlfriend would stop playing games was when she was asked to pick up a weapon and start fighting. It would conform to her idea of what a videogame was and she would become very, very bored."

Losing combat was controversial. Released before the avoidance-based gameplay of *Amnesia: Dark Descent* or *Alien: Isolation*, *Shattered Memories*' 'flight not fight' approach was an anomaly. "Of all the pressures internally, in the publisher reviews the question would always be, 'Are you trying to make a game where you just walk around and nothing happens?' I was like, 'No, but that's a valid experience…'"

Silent Hill: Shattered Memories was originally slated for release on Wii, PSP and PlayStation 2. During development, with money being tight, Konami agreed to ditch the PS2 version, but it was resurrected after it became clear that the projected audience for this type of game on Wii simply wasn't enough to drive sales. "Towards the end of development, just as were coming up to the end of production [in late 2009], it was decided Wii was not doing great. In order to make this project make [financial] sense, we needed a PS2 SKU, because in South America the PS2 was still huge and there was an audience for this kind of game out there and in a couple of other territories."

Ultimately the PS2 version helped the game more or less break even; one estimate puts total units sold across all platforms at 440,000. However, it lacked the innovative motion-control features that made the Wii iteration so exciting. For a dev team that had tried so hard to innovate, it was a compromised version of their vision.

"It was a catch-22," Barlow says. "Its problems, commercially, were that it was a *Silent Hill* game and it was on Wii. But if it hadn't been a *Silent Hill* game and if it hadn't been on Wii, it would never have existed the way it existed." An exciting new platform and a franchise known for its rich narratives opened up possibilities that normally wouldn't have been an option. "You can probably count on one hand the number of IPs where a publisher would let you say, 'We want to tell a deep, meaningful, moving story.'"

The publishers' other strategy didn't help matters much. "In the end, Konami marketed it as a core gamer title," Barlow says. It was exactly the opposite of what his team had been working towards. "It was very frustrating for us that we ended up with the same Metacritic on *Shattered Memories* as on *Origins*," he continues. "Generally the negativity came from people who were opposed to playing a core game on Wii anyway. [It was] something that could have been negated by selling the game [differently]."

After *Shattered Memories* shipped, Barlow and his team moved onto *Legacy Of Kain: Dead Sun*, a PS4 launch title for Square Enix. "We took a lot of things we'd learned from *Shattered Memories* and were doing them on a much bigger scale, although more subtly," Barlow says. Progressive and ambitious, the game was canned after the team had spent three years on it.

Barlow remains convinced that *Shattered Memories*' attempt to grow a narrative and experience around individual players still offers exciting possibilities. "There's an appetite for doing interesting story things and there's a certain type of story-driven game indies can't make: the kind with high production values and expensive mo-cap. Over the last year, publishers are suddenly much more interested in talking…" ■



James Sharman
Technical director,
Climax Studios

What was the jump from PSP to Wii like?
At that time you could have walked into any studio and had a chance of finding a dev team trying to work out what to do with this strange new input device. We had a main character renowned for carrying a torch and a controller designed for pointing at things; it felt like a good fit. I was very proud of what we had achieved technically on PSP with *Origins*, but moving to a more powerful platform is always a great opportunity to explore new ideas and techniques.

What did it take to get so much out of Wii?
I've always got a kick out of pushing hardware as hard as I can. It was also very motivating to be working with a content team who took every new feature and really put the effort in to get some amazing results. I had previously enjoyed working on the NGC, and the similarity in hardware with Wii meant it was possible to jump in quickly and start exploring ideas.

The shadows cast by the Remote flashlight look great. Were they difficult to get right?
For *Origins* it was a big technical challenge just to get basic shadow-casting going on the PSP alongside the other elements in the scene; on *SH:SM*, things became more complex when we needed to cast shadows from semi-transparent objects and onto different kinds of surfaces.

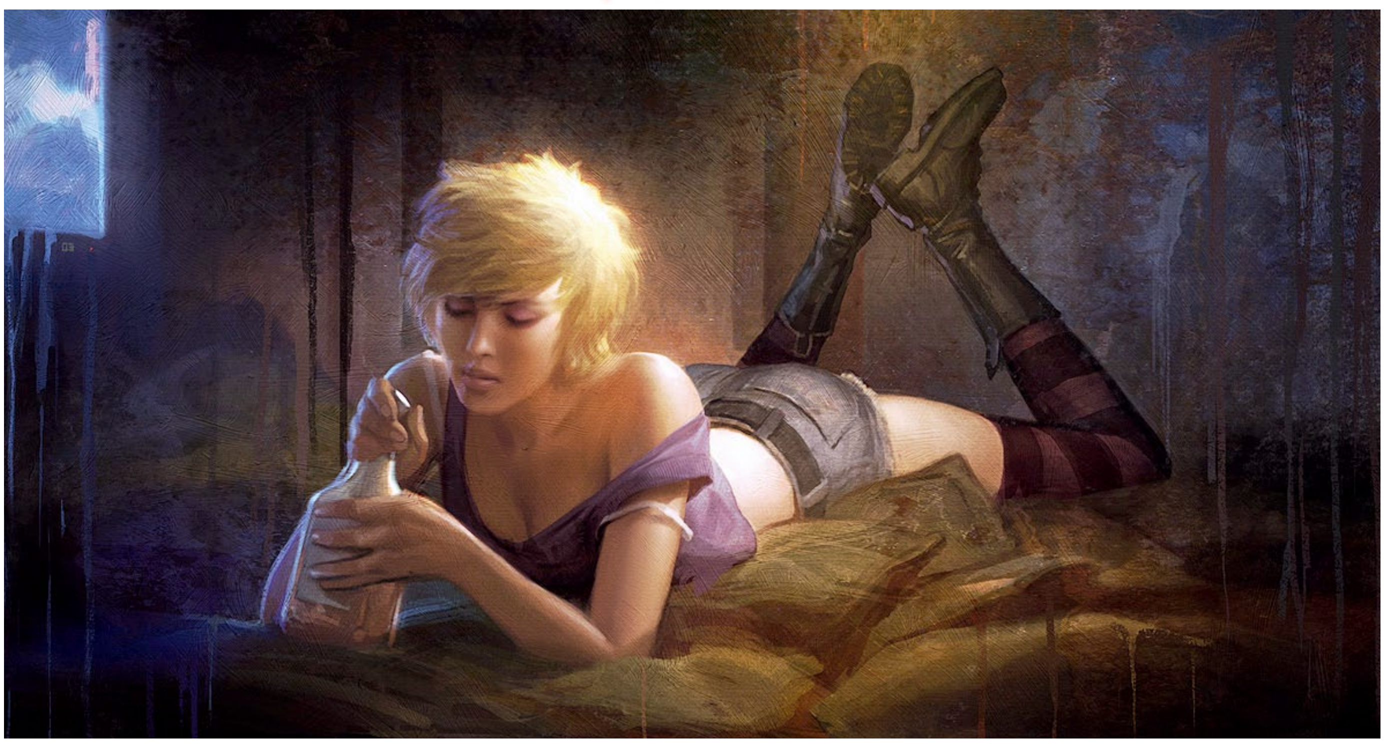








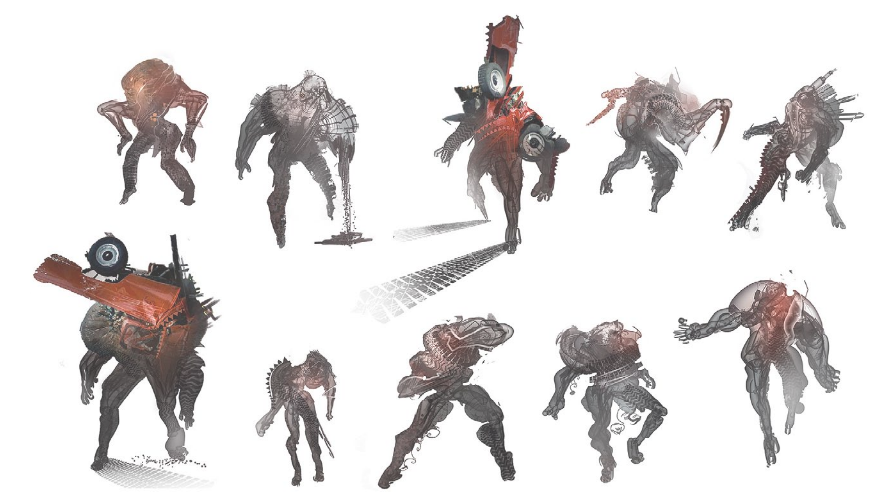

Franchise fans will find many changes in *Shattered Memories*' cast (left). What the flashlight illuminates (above) matters under the hood. A very different Dahlia (below) surprised players of the original *Silent Hill*



Primal fear

"Fear isn't so difficult to understand," reckoned Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense. "After all, weren't we all frightened as children?" *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*' lead designer Sam Barlow certainly was. Spending his childhood in Tanzania, he remembers being chased around a swimming pool by furious baboons as a terrified nipper.

Late in the development of *Shattered Memories*, he realised that the game's first chase in particular, in which faceless Raw Shock monsters pursue Harry Mason into an empty pool, stemmed from that formative real-life nightmare. Although his desire to have the game's ghouls running on all fours never came to pass – it was too hard to spot them when they were close to the ground – the flocking AI and their ability to smell their prey gave them a primal, animalistic edge. And that was before they leapt onto Mason's back and tried to fell him like a sprinting gazelle…



In line with *Shattered Memories*' obsessions, these sketches are influenced by the inkblot test devised by Hermann Rorschach

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Can you really learn game design?

We live in a time when games have become a hot area in skills education. In the UK, a considerable charge led by figures such as Ian Livingstone drives for better education at school and university level to turn out graduates in game production and animation.

In the US, there are several fully fledged colleges, such as DigiPen, that teach many skills to aspiring young professionals. For hefty fees, you can learn the requisite skills and often find placements in big studios.

The purpose is to help fill a need for quality staff. In the UK, the concern is that there aren't enough great young candidates to do the required work and that this will shrink the industry. So courses fashion employable candidates with formal training and experience to help make the next *Destiny*. Courses thus teach games as a kind of career and get young game makers into the idea that this is primarily a production industry. And that's where the counter-arguments start.

The first argument is about bootstraps. There are more free tools out there than ever before to teach coding, art and other disciplines. "Why," the bootstrapper asks, "pay lots of money to learn this stuff when it's just lying around?" He argues that the novice who throws themselves at a project will learn much more than if she goes to school, and at a fraction of the cost.

The second argument is about the value of general versus specialist education. Many programmers say they prefer graduates with computer science over game development degrees, because specialist courses are good at teaching engines, but poor at fundamentals.

The third argument is about the changing state of the industry. Games evolve and so by the time a graduate has come through and learned one set of techniques, the industry has already moved on. How are colleges to keep pace with new business models and technologies?

These arguments boil down to a lack of faith in skills education. They imply that skills are all well and good, but if you go down this route then you'll end up taking on lots of debt and sacrificing your ambition. That's great if you want to work in an orchestra, but not if you want to start a band.



What a game designer does, what good game design looks like, and what's good and bad practice are open questions

In my experience, such attitudes show a lack of familiarity with the material in many courses. A course might concentrate on art or programming, project management or design. It might be strictly skills-focused or embrace a wider brief. Some courses are aimed at neophytes, while others assume at least a baseline familiarity.

The fact is also that working on triple-A games is the ambition of many students. They've grown up seeing games surpass their humble roots and decided that the industry is what they want to be a part of. While being an indie is attractive, not everyone desires a career scrabbling for a living in mobile games, hoping for the next big thing.

I increasingly find myself in support of the idea that studying in a formal setting is just as valid as self-teaching, with one big exception: game design. 'What is game design?' is still a question that confounds many people. What a game designer does, what good game design looks like, and what's good and bad practice are open questions. Design retains the aura of alchemy.

Students have an idea that design has something to do with writing things down or directing teams or something, but it's never very clear. There are many books that talk about design in rounded terms. Yet there are few, if any, practicable guides for how to design better.

College courses frequently struggle with this question just as much as students. Most think it's sort of the film direction of the game industry. Or maybe screenwriting. Nobody's entirely sure, and those definitions stack up very badly against what many working studios do.

So it's very common to hear advice like 'read and be good at everything', or for design to be a second-stage career for skills practitioners. But game design is just a skill. The advantage that most game production skills have over design is that their output is tangible. Making a great model, developing a great engine or putting together an actionable budget is clear.

Great design, on the other hand, is more a matter of opinion. Because games are perceived as a nascent medium, ideology and politics frequently come into design discussion. Design sessions are rarely about good practice or smart strategies and more about philosophy. There's little sense of 'good' in a conventional sense and tons of 'good' in a political sense.

Attempts to break up this logjam (such as formalism) usually encounter heavy resistance. So the confusion of craft with polemic causes lots of problems. Countless times I've encountered students, developers and teachers who are tired of the politics and just want sound tutorship.

What's the best practice for writing out mechanics? How do you draw a wireframe? How should you design controls? How to implement social features? These are straightforward questions with pragmatic answers, but their know-how has yet to penetrate most teaching.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Create. Share. Play

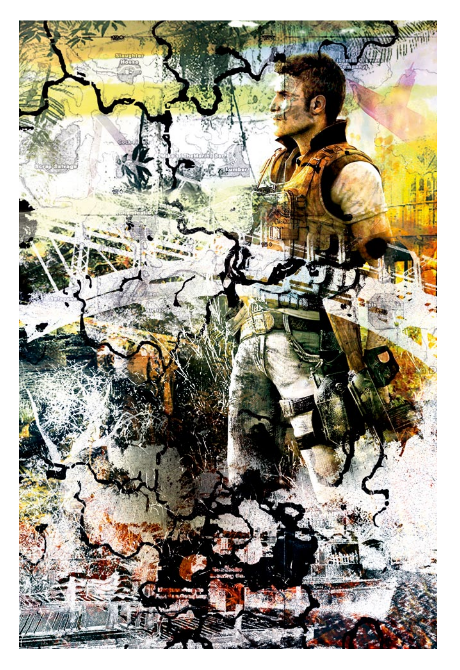
Back in 2006, the *Far Cry 2* team went to Paris to present the game concept to Ubisoft management for approval. One of the biggest hurdles we needed to overcome was to prove that we could deliver the ambitious goals of the project under the time and budget constraints we were given. We were pitching the idea that we could deliver a 50km^2 open-world firstperson shooter with about 100 hours of gameplay, built by a team smaller than the one that had delivered the 12-hour linear experience of *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*.

A huge part of our pitch was a video that showed a 60:1 time-lapse screen capture of eight hours of work from a single level designer and a single artist working together to build 1km^2 of our game world, delivering both visuals and gameplay to a shippable (for pre-alpha) quality, starting completely from scratch.

The artist started by using noise patterns and filters in Photoshop to generate a grayscale image that would become the height field for the environment. He then painted in textures and foliage, set a water level, painted in a road and river, created a foliage system, and generated a jungle and a savannah. He threw a few structures in a clearing, adjusted the entire environment to look good in different lighting and weather scenarios, and handed it off to a designer.

The designer moved the buildings around, added some AI, and threw in some patrol paths and guard points. He added some mounted weapon emplacements, cover, vehicles and animals, and set up some burnable areas (this was before fire propagation was a fully systemic feature). He tweaked and tuned the gameplay by diving into and out of the game repeatedly (the game could be compiled and launched from the editor in an instant, even at this early stage) to make sure everything was working and fun. The eight-minute video and the playable output that it produced was instrumental in convincing Ubisoft we would be able to materially deliver on the promise of the game.

Despite how amazing the technology was at the time, I did not appreciate its importance until recently. The tools we used to build the game went on to become the backbone for the in-game level editor, and thousands of players made and published levels. The YouTube trailer for the *Far Cry 2* editor pitched the core idea behind the editor in three bold words on a black screen in the middle of the video: "Create. Share. Play."



Every game going in front of executive review will need to demonstrate that it holds the potential for expressive play

In retrospect, these ideas and the technology that enabled them were amazingly prescient – although admittedly we were kind of stumbling through utilitarian necessity into a future that other developers were actively trying to build. The pillars of *LittleBigPlanet*, which launched around the same time as *Far Cry 2*, were 'Play, Create, Share', so the idea that the act of playing games was itself a constructive, creative act that supported the growth and development of healthy communities was already beginning to flourish.

Even as Ben Abraham was sharing his *Far Cry 2* permadeath experience by chronicling his playthrough of the game, and millions of *LittleBigPlanet* levels were flooding PlayStation 3 hard drives worldwide, Notch was hard at work on a game that would forever cement these ideas in the popular consciousness. Today, more than 13 million people have bought *Minecraft*. There are tens, if not hundreds of thousands of *Minecraft* videos on YouTube, with billions of views.

Every day people sign on to watch *SpyParty* matches. Thousands of people broadcast their run at the *Spelunky* Daily Challenge or *CS:GO* matches. More people tuned in to watch the finals of last year's International than have ever played *Far Cry 2*. The value generated by games being played will likely soon exceed the value generated by the games as products themselves.

Games are entering a new era, one where every game that goes in front of executive review will need to demonstrate that it holds the potential for expressive play, so that any given player can potentially draw in an audience of millions. Games that require every player to execute the same rote steps to proceed from one thrilling cinematic setpiece to the next will not sustain the engagement of audiences. Games with dynamic, unpredictable systems that require and reward skill and cunning and creativity from players will be increasingly able to draw audiences – and consequently to draw publisher financing.

None of this should come as a surprise. When we consider games in their broader historical context – when we look at the history of chess or football or poker – we can see that for most of human history, games of all types have been valuable not just for what they represent as a set of rules and game pieces in a box, but for how they engage us collectively, socially, while being executed at runtime.

Games never were objects, and the financial importance placed over the past couple of decades on the singleplayer computer game, consumed alone, unwitnessed, in a darkened room is a bizarre anomaly that is – thankfully, I think – about to meet its end.

Clint Hocking is a game designer who lives in Seattle and works at Valve Software. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Weird science

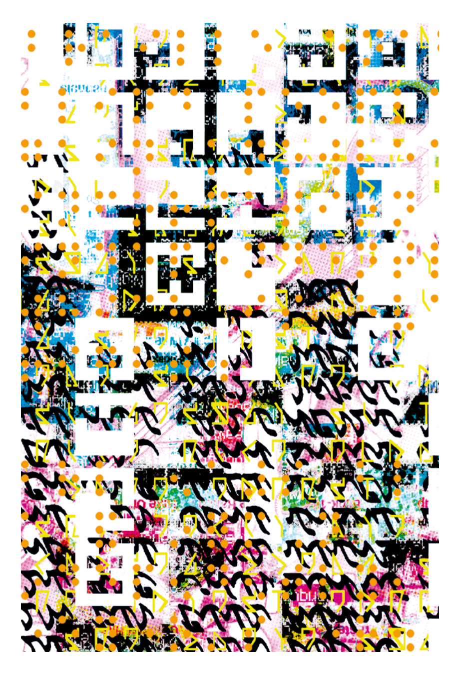
Remember the weird language used by the D'ni people in the *Myst* series? It was a thing of beauty, and added an interesting layer to the game. Those are not the main reasons why I liked it, though. What I really liked was knowing that the developers had bothered to create it, and had done so with a depth and commitment that frankly made them heroic. But I am a sucker for that sort of thing. I'm the kid who reckoned the best thing about the Star Wars films was the languages. Heck, they even needed subtitles. Swoon! So naturally I imagine the *Myst* guys had a similar mindset to me and loved the challenge of making up their language as well.

Sure, there are other games with made-up languages in them. *Jade Empire* on Xbox had one. Even – if my ancient memory can be relied upon – the *Ultima* series had monsters and gargoyles talking a gibberish dialect. Of course, games that pull this trick don't usually require the player to actually learn these languages (although it can help). The reason I think they're there is to create a distance between those who understand them and those who can't – namely, you.

When you play a game, you're so immersed in the world that it's hard for any element to seem weird. It takes minutes to get used to the game physics, the abilities of the character or vehicle you control, and the effects you can wreak upon those around you. It's possible to become very comfortable with a game world very quickly. And that's a good thing. But sometimes you just need to say to the player, "These guys over here are just not like you. They're not meant to be understood. Not by you right now, at least. That's why they talk like that."

So I love weird languages in games, and I say this as someone who's spent a vast amount of time playing games that use nothing but the impenetrable and baffling language of Japanese. But it's not just weird languages. It's weirdness in games itself. And it has always been with us. I need only say two words: Jeff Minter.

I recently had the pleasure of trying a game called *Rhythm Heaven Fever* on Wii. For a start, that's the best videogame name ever. And when you calm down and play the game, it doesn't disappoint. Although underneath it's just a 'get



I'm the kid who reckoned the best thing about the Star Wars films was the languages. They even needed subtitles. Swoon!

your timing right' game, it does so in a way that will melodically remove your sanity. Dogs and cats playing tennis between two bouncing light aircraft, a mandrill throwing golf balls, robots destroying each other: it's all here, and these are the most 'normal' examples. And, of course, it all works because underneath there is a game that you 'get' in the first ten seconds, and that you have every chance of winning.

Also fun is when weird gets creepy. Remember all the fuss about Herobrine in *Minecraft*? I find *Minecraft* a creepy place to be at the best of times; there's something nightmarish about the vast scale of it. But a while back, people started talking about weird structures appearing, which they hadn't made themselves. Also, there were those holding electric torches under their chins and telling tales of long tunnels and mysterious mazes, all apparently created by the mysterious Herobrine, a character coded deep into the game. Which turned out to be rubbish, of course. But it made *Minecraft* a far more interesting place to be – more me, at least.

And for a different sort of weird, we only need to look at *Fallout 3*. On top of the drug reference fuss in Australia and the rejigging of some of the named elements required for it to be sold in Japan, it has now become famous for being able to predict future disasters and deaths, using numbers stations and Morse code. As in the *Minecraft* case, the game's developer – Bethesda in this instance – denies that it has anything to do with all this esoterica, but there's no question that it must be secretly pleased. All publicity is good publicity, after all. And at the time of writing, with *Fallout 4* still eagerly anticipated, rumours of its creepiness are scuttling around the Internet like nuke-proof cockroaches.

Of course, it's not hard to make a weird game. Just like adding new and exciting languages to it, you simply pay attention to the detail. I worked on a proto-language for a game called *BC* a few years ago. The plan was to name everything in the game, and to create a host of other discoverable words for things that simply didn't. Not only did these things not exist, but neither does the game now. Sigh.

Where were we? Oh, yes. Creating weird games. So whenever you see something obvious and normal, you take it out. And you put in things that you don't quite understand. But what I believe you can't do is artificially generate the forum fusses and the creepypasta stories that give your game's weirdness a life of its own. All you can do is include the seeds and hope someone sees them and spreads them across a receptive world.

I've tried doing this many times – from *Dungeon Keeper* through to *Black & White* and *Fable*, there are elements tucked away, waiting for someone to notice. And few people seem to. Or if they do, they don't mention them on the Internet. And I'm not going to mention them here.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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